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To: Liz Pelletier <liz@entangledpublishing.com>

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Hi Liz,

Here is the all but the final couple of chapters-- which I am working on right now. I've gone back and made the changes so she's not a witch, as well as layered in some gargoyle stuff. I will layer in more during final edits.

Hope you like where I've gone with it-- can't wait to see what you think of the bad guy!

xoxo,
Tracy

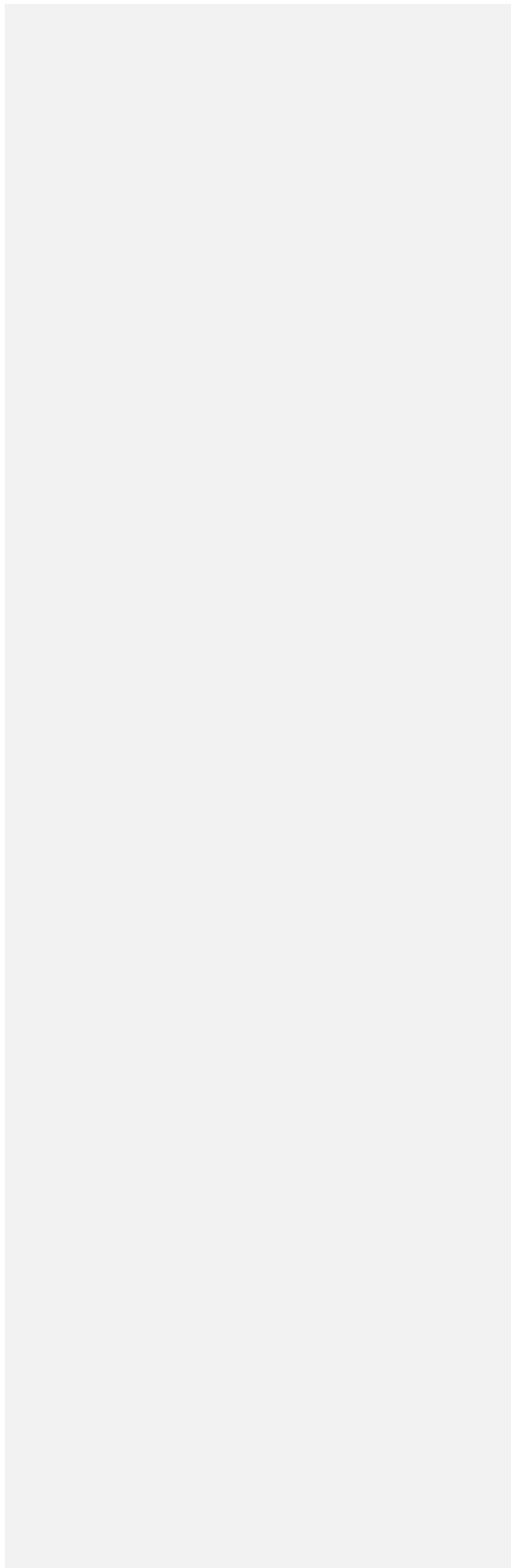
CRAVE

By

Tracy Wolff

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Edited by Liz Pelletier and Stacy Abrams



I stand at the outer tarmac door staring at the plane I am about to get on and try my hardest not to freak the f out.

It's easier said than done.

Not just because I am about to leave everything I know behind, though up until two minutes ago, that *was* my main concern. Now, however, as I stare at this plane that I'm not even sure deserves the dignity of being called a plane, a whole new level of panic is setting in.

"So, Grace." The man my Uncle Finn sent to pick me up looks down at me with a patient smile. Philip, I think he said his name was, but I can't be sure. It's hard to hear him over the wild beating of my heart. "Are you ready for an adventure?"

No. No, I am *not* the least bit ready—for an adventure or anything else that's about to come my way.

If you had told me a month ago that I would be standing on the outskirts of an airport in Fairbanks, Alaska, I would have told you that you were crazy. If you had told me that the whole reason I was in Fairbanks was to catch the tiniest puddle jumper in existence to what feels like the very edges of the world—or in this case, a town on the outskirts of Denali, the highest mountain in North America—I would have told you that you were flat out nuts.

But here I am, because a lot can change in thirty days.

And, as it turns out, a lot more can change in one.

Chapter One

“There she is,” Philip says as we clear the peaks of several mountains, taking one hand off the steering column to point to a small collection of buildings in the distance. “Healy, Alaska. Home sweet home.”

“Oh, wow. It looks-...” Tiny. It looks really, really tiny. Way smaller than just my neighborhood in San Diego, let alone the city.

Then again, it’s pretty hard to see much of anything up here. Not because of the mountains that loom over the area like monsters, but because we’re in the middle of a weird kind of haze that Philip refers to as “civil twilight” even though it’s barely five o’clock. Still, I can see well enough to make out that the town he’s pointing at is full of mismatched buildings randomly grouped together. I finally settle on, “Interesting. It looks-...-interesting.”

It’s not the first description that pops into my head—no, that’s the old cliché that hell has actually frozen over—but it is the most polite one as Philip drops even lower, preparing for what I’m pretty sure will be yet another harrowing incident in the list of harrowing incidents that have plagued me since I got on a plane ten hours ago.

Sure enough, I’ve only just spotted what passes for an airport in this one-thousand-person town (thank you, Google) when Philip says, “Hang on, Grace. It’s a short runway because it’s hard to keep a long one clear of snow or ice for any amount of time out here. It’s going to be a quick landing.”

Commented [ep1]: But below you say it’s dark outside. We should correct the “dark” references bcause I’ve seen this civil twilight and it’s not really dark at all.

Commented [WU2]: Ok

Commented [ep3]: lol

I have no idea what a “quick landing” means, but it doesn’t sound good. So I grab the bar on the plane door—which I’m pretty sure exists for just this very reason—and hold on tight as we drop lower and lower.

“Okay, kid. Here goes nothing!” Philip tells me. Which, by the way, definitely makes the top five things you don’t *ever* want to hear your pilot say while you’re still in the air.

The ground looms white and unyielding just below us, and I squeeze my eyes shut. Seconds later, I feel the wheels skip across the ground. Then Philip hits the brakes hard enough to slam me forward so fast that my seatbelt is the only thing keeping my head from meeting the control panel. The plane whines—not sure what part of it is making the horrendous noise or if it’s a collective death knell—and I choose not to focus on it. Especially when we start skidding to the left.

I bite my lip, keep my eyes squeezed firmly shut. If this is the end, I don’t need to see it coming. The thought distracts me, has me wondering just what my mom and dad saw coming, and by the time I shut down that line of thinking, Philip has the plane sliding to a shaky, shuddering halt.

I know exactly how it feels. Right now, even my toes are trembling.

I peel my eyes open slowly, resisting the urge to pat myself down to make sure I really am still in one piece. But Philip just laughs and says, “Textbook landing.”

Maybe if that textbook is a horror novel, one he’s reading upside down and backwards... I don’t say anything, though. Just give him the best smile I can manage and grab my backpack from under my feet. I pull out the pair of gloves my Uncle Finn sent me and put them on. Then I push open the plane door and jump down, praying the whole time that my knees will support me when I hit the ground.

They do, just barely. After taking a few seconds to make sure I'm not going to crumble—and to pull my brand new coat more tightly around me because it's about eight degrees out here, *literally*—I head to the back of the plane to retrieve the three suitcases that are all that is left of my life. I feel a pang looking at them, but I don't let myself dwell on everything I had to leave behind, any more than I let myself dwell on the idea of strangers living in the house I grew up in. After all, who cares about a house or art supplies or a drum kit when I've lost so much more?

Instead, I grab a bag out of what passes for the tiny airplane's cargo hold and wrestle it to the ground. But before I can reach for the second, Philip is there, lifting my other two suitcases like they're filled with pillows instead of everything I own in the world.

"Come on, Grace. Let's go before you start to turn blue out here." He nods toward a parking lot—not even a *building*, just a parking lot—about two hundred yards away, and I want to groan. It's so cold out that now I'm shaking for a whole different reason. How can anyone live like this? It's insane, especially considering it was seventy degrees where I woke up this morning.

There's nothing to do but nod, though, so I do. Then grab onto the handle of my suitcase and start dragging it toward a small patch of concrete that I'm pretty sure passes for an airplane terminal in Healy. All I can say is, it's a far cry from San Diego's Lindbergh Field.

Philip overtakes me easily, a large suitcase dangling from each hand like it's nothing. I start to tell him that he can pull the handles out and roll them, but the second I step off the runway and onto the snowy ground that surrounds it in all directions, I figure out why he's carrying them. Turns out it's just about impossible to roll a heavy suitcase over snow...

I'm near frozen by the time we make it halfway to the parking lot, despite my heavy jacket and synthetic fur-lined gloves. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do from here—how I'm

Commented [ep4]: Used this word above too. I like it here. Maybe change first one?

Commented [WU5]: Changed the one above

Commented [WU6]: Turns out gargoyles have an affinity for music ... looks like I was laying the ground work all along ;)

supposed to get to the boarding school my uncle is headmaster of—and I turn to ask Philip if Uber is even a thing up here. But before I can get a word out, someone steps out from behind one of the pickup trucks in the lot and rushes straight toward me.

I think it's my cousin Macy, but it's hard to tell **considering** she's covered from head to toe in protective weather gear.

Commented [WU7]: Changed it so we know where Macy was

"You're here!" the moving pile of hats, scarves, and jackets says, and I was right—it's definitely Macy.

"I'm here," I agree dryly, wondering if it's too late to reconsider foster care. Or emancipation. Or homelessness. Being homeless in San Diego has got to be better than living in a town whose airport consists of one runway and a tiny parking lot. Heather is going to die when I text her.

"Finally!" Macy says, reaching out for a **hug**. It's a little awkward, partly because of all the clothes she's wearing and partly because--despite being a year younger than my own seventeen years-- she's about eight inches taller than I am. "I've been waiting for over an hour."

Commented [ep8]: Can we slip in here her age? Macy is only a year younger than I am, but for a moment she seems older as her arms squeeze me confidently. I dunno. Not that but something like that. lol

Commented [WU9]: Ok

I hug her back, but with all the scarves and coats between us, it feels strange. I let go quickly as I answer, "Sorry, my plane was late from Seattle. The storm there made it hard for them to take off."

"Yeah, we hear that a lot," she tells me with a grimace. "Pretty sure their weather is even worse than ours."

I want to argue—miles of snow, terrifying mountain cliffs and weird **darkness** that isn't really darkness seem pretty freaking awful to me. But I don't know Macy all that well, despite the fact that we're cousins, and the last thing I want to do is offend her. After all, besides Uncle Finn and now Philip, she is the only other person I know in this place.

Commented [WU10]: Changed it to this to reflect the not really dark part of civil twilight, as requested

Which is why, in the end, I just shrug.

It must be a good enough answer, though, because she grins back at me before turning to Philip, who is still carrying my suitcases. “Thanks so much for picking her up, Uncle Philip. Dad says to tell you he owes you a case of beer.”

“No worries, Mace. Had to run a few errands in Fairbanks anyway.” He says it so casually, like hopping in a plane for a couple hundred-mile round trip journey is no big deal. Then again, out here where there’s nothing but mountains and snow in all directions, maybe it’s not. After all, according to Wikipedia, Healy only has one major road in and out of it, and in the winter sometimes even that gets closed down.

I’ve spent the last month trying to imagine what that looks like. What it *is* like.

I guess I’m about to find out.

“Still, he says he’ll be around Friday with that beer so you guys can watch the game in true bff style.” She turns to me. “My dad’s really upset he couldn’t make it out to pick you up, Grace. There was an emergency at the school that no one else could deal with. But he told me to get him the second we make it back.”

“No worries,” I tell her. Because what else am I supposed to say? Besides if I’ve learned anything in the month since my parents died, it’s just how little most things matter.

Who cares who picks me up as long as I get to the school?

Who cares where I live if it’s not going to be with my mom and dad?

Philip walks us to the edge of the cleared parking lot before finally letting go of my suitcases. Macy gives him a quick hug good-bye -and I shake his hand, murmur, “Thanks for coming to get me.”

Commented [ep11]: If he’s Macy’s uncle then he’s HER uncle too. Why wouldn’t she mention that earlier?

Commented [WU12]: Honorary Uncle—like my kids call my best friend Aunt Jenn. That’s what I meant. Hmm, how to show this. Or, subsequently, uncle on her mother’s side

Commented [WU13]: Added the bff thing down here so we know who Philip is, per above question

“Not a problem at all, Grace. Any time you need a flight, I’m your man.” He winks at us both, then heads back to the tarmac to deal with his plane. We watch him go for a couple seconds before Macy grabs the handles on both suitcases and starts rolling them across the tiny parking lot. She gestures for me to do the same with the one I’m holding onto, so I do, even though a part of me wants nothing more than to run back onto the tarmac with Philip, climb back into the plane, and demand to be flown back to Fairbanks. Or, even better, back home to San Diego.

It’s a feeling that only gets worse when Macy says, “Do you need to pee? It’s a good ninety-minute ride to the school from here.”

Ninety minutes? That doesn’t seem possible when the whole town looks like we could drive it in fifteen, maybe twenty minutes at the most. Then again, when we were flying over, I didn’t see any building remotely big enough to be a boarding school for close to a thousand teenagers, so maybe the school isn’t actually in Healy.

I can’t help but think of the mountains and rivers that surround this town in all directions and wonder where on earth I’m going to end up before this day is through. And where exactly she expects me to pee out here anyway.

“I’m okay,” I answer after a minute, even as my stomach somersaults and pitches nervously.

This whole day has been about getting here and that was bad enough. But as we roll my suitcases through the darkness, the well below freezing air slapping at me with each step we take—everything gets super real, super fast. Especially when she walks past the few parked cars and stops in front of a snowmobile with a sled attached to the back of it.

Commented [ep14]: plane?

Commented [ep15]: On the back of a snowmobile? Is that normal up there? I have no reference for how long people ride snowmobiles at a whack. ☺

Commented [WU16]: Just spent half an hour looking this up. People use it as a car, so they ride for hours sometimes—has replaced the dogsled.

Commented [ep17]: Hmm now reading it 2000 seems insanely big for a castle. What about 800? :P

Commented [WU18]: LOL. I always thought so ... 800 works.

Commented [ep19]: I think it should be bigger. 200 kinds is a small school—which means small student body to control. Half the point of the hero is if the monsters get lose, they’ll kill the world of humans. What’s 200 kids gonna do? Not saying make it 10,000 like a college, but maybe 2,000 like a large high school. Also, is this school k-12? It would be much bigger if so.

Commented [WU20]: I was thinking high school only—I think they stay at home until they’re ready to be out in the world. And sure. 2000 works for me.

Commented [WU21]: Changed above

Commented [ep22]: Echo on rolls in previous sentence

At first, I think she's joking around, but then she starts loading my suitcases onto the sled and it occurs to me that this is really happening. I'm really about to be riding a snowmobile in this near dark through *Alaska* in weather that is over twenty degrees below freezing, if the app on my phone can be believed.

Commented [ep23]: You say above it's 8 degrees out.

Commented [WU24]: Freezing is 32, so here we're talking about 12 degrees. I was taking a little liberty. Added over 20 degrees to cover the last four degrees

All that's missing is the wicked witch cackling that she's going to get me and my little dog, too. Then again, at this point, that would probably be redundant.

I watch with a kind of horrified fascination as Macy straps my suitcases to the sled. I should probably offer to help, but I wouldn't even know where to begin. And since the last thing I want is for the few belongings I have left to be strewn across the side of a mountain, I figure if there was ever a time to leave things to the experts, this is it.

"Here, you're going to need these," Macy tells me, opening up the small bag that was already strapped to the sled when we got out here. She rummages around for a second before pulling out a pair of heavy snow pants and a thick wool scarf. They are both hot pink, my favorite color when I was a kid but not so much now. Still, it's obvious Macy remembered that from the last time I saw her, and I can't help being touched at how kind she's being as she holds them out to me.

"Thanks." After a few false starts, I manage to pull the pants on over the thermal underwear and fleece pajama pants with emojis on them (the only kind of fleece pants I own) that I put on at my uncle's instruction before boarding the plane in Seattle. Then I start to wind the scarf around my neck.

"No, not like that." Macy unwinds her rainbow-colored scarf so she can demonstrate what I should do. "You need to wrap it around your face, too. All the way up so that it covers your nose."

I watch her as she demonstrates, then try to follow suit. It's harder than it looks, especially trying to get it tight enough to keep it from sliding down my nose the second I move. Eventually I manage it, though, and that's when Macy reaches for one of the helmets draped over the snowmobile's handles.

"The helmet is insulated, so it will help keep you warm as well as protect your head in case of a crash," she instructs. "Plus, it's got a shield to protect your eyes from the cold air."

Yeah, definitely not in Kansas anymore. Right now, San Diego seems as far off as the moon.

"Will my eyes freeze, too?" I ask, as I take the helmet from her and try to ignore how hard it is to breathe with the scarf over my nose.

"Eyes don't freeze," Macy says with a little laugh, like she can't help herself. "But the shield will keep them from watering and make you more comfortable."

"Oh, right." I duck my head as my cheeks heat up. "I'm an idiot."

"No, you're not." Macy wraps an arm around my shoulders and squeezes tight. "Alaska is a lot. Everyone who comes here has a learning curve. You'll figure it all out soon enough."

I'm not holding my breath on that one—I can't imagine that this cold, foreign place will ever feel familiar to me—but I don't say anything. Not when Macy has already done so much to try and make me feel welcome.

"I'm really sorry you had to come here, Grace," she continues after a second. "I mean, I'm really excited that you're here. I just wish it wasn't because..." Her voice drifts off before she finishes the sentence. But I'm used to that by now. After weeks of having my friends and teachers tiptoe around me, I've learned that no one wants to say the words.

I just wish I knew why. It's not like not saying it out loud makes my parents any less dead. Nor does it make me miss them any less. But it turns out people are weird about death and even weirder about grieving. Like both are contagious or something.

Still, I don't fill in the blanks. Instead, I just slip my head in the helmet and secure it the way Macy taught me.

Commented [ep25]: She already did that above

Commented [WU26]: I changed it above

"Ready?" she asks; once I've got my face and head as protected as they are going to get.

The answer hasn't changed since Philip asked me the same question in Fairbanks. *Not even close*. "Yeah. Absolutely."

"Good. Wait for me to get on the snowmobile, then climb on behind me. You can grab onto the rails or wrap your arms around me, whichever you feel more comfortable with."

I don't feel comfortable with any part of this, but considering my alternative is standing out here until I do freeze—eyes and all—I nod my understanding, then wait for Macy to get settled before climbing on behind her.

It feels strange to wrap my arms around her—we may be cousins, but we are also virtual strangers, since we haven't seen each other in seven years—so I grab onto the bars she indicated earlier.

And try not to freak out as she turns on the snowmobile's headlight and shifts it into gear.

Seconds later, we're speeding away from the one road that leads to the airport and into the darkness that stretches endlessly in front of us.

I've never been more terrified in my life.

Commented [ep27]: love

Chapter Two

The ride isn't as bad as I thought it would be.

I mean, it isn't good, but that has more to do with me being freaked out by the snow, the cold, the steady climb up the side of a mountain, and the creepingunending darkness all around us than any discomfort from the snowmobile.

"Doing okay?" Macy shouts to be heard above the wind whipping past us.

"Great!" I shout back, seconds before a long, low howl sounds in the (not very) distance. The strangled scream I let out as it registers pretty much negates the effort I put into lying about how I'm doing.

"Don't worry about the wolves," Macy yells. "They won't bother us."

I wish I could feel half as confident as she sounds, but every bad survival movie I've ever seen is suddenly playing through my head. And it only gets worse when, seconds later, a half-growl, half-roar sound rips through the night.

"What's that?" I demand.

Commented [ep28]: to imply it's getting darker since it was twilight when she landed or wait, isn't it never dark in Alaska this far up in winter? We need to check this darkness thing. I think even "dark" isn't really dark and maybe that's what you meant by "civil twilight" which is fine, but then we can't say "darkness" all the time b/c it's not really truly dark, just sort of dark.

Commented [WU29]: I used the daylight clock from the Alaska government site which says when sunrise and sunset is (as well as when civil twilight begins) for every single day of the year in nearly every city or town in Alaska. It's really cool. So all this has been vetted by that daylight calculator for Denali (14 minutes from Healy) <https://www.alaska.org/weather/daylight-hours/denali/november>

Commented [WU30]:

“Sounds like a pissed off bear. Probably cold and ready for hibernation even though it’s still a few weeks off.”

“A bear?” I whip my head around, as if I have a chance of seeing a bear coming in the dark. The roar sounds again, this time even closer, and my stomach goes from flip-flopping to taking up residence somewhere around the vicinity of my toes. “Where?”

“Don’t worry. They can’t run as fast as the snowmobile.”

The fact that speed is the only thing between us and a snarling bear isn’t exactly what I would call comforting. Still, it’s better than the alternative, so I hold on tight and vow not to fall off. I didn’t come all this way just to become a snack for the local wildlife on my very first night.

It seems like hours—but is probably closer to the ninety minutes Macy estimated—when we veer off the trail (and I mean trail in the loosest sense of the word) we’ve been following and onto a kind of plateau on the side of the mountain. As we wind our way through trees, I finally see lights up ahead. “Is that Katsmere Academy?” I shout.

“Yeah.” Macy lays off the speed a little, steering around trees like we’re on a giant slalom course. “We should be there in about five minutes.”

Thank God. I’m not sure what part of me is the most frozen right now, but I think it might be my toes. Turns out my boots are no match for the cold, even with two pairs of wool socks on underneath.

Another roar sounds, but this time it’s distant enough not to freak me out. Plus, as we finally clear the thicket of trees, it’s hard to pay attention to anything but the huge building looming in front of us, growing closer with every second that passes.

Commented [ep31]: Wouldn’t it be hibernating now? Maybe a mountain lion?

Commented [WU32]: It’s the very beginning of November. They won’t hibernate for at least another month—I checked it out earlier ☺

Commented [WU33]: ??? Was there supposed to be a comment? Are you okay with the name?

Commented [ep34]:

Or should I say *castle*, because the dwelling in front of us looks nothing like a modern building. And absolutely nothing like any school I have ever seen. I tried to Google it before I got here, but apparently Katsmere Academy is so elite even Google hasn't heard of it.

First of all, it's big. Like really big...and sprawling. From here it looks like the brick wall in front of the castle stretches halfway around the mountain.

Secondly, it's elegant. Like, really elegant, with architecture I've only heard described in my art classes before. Things like vaulted arches, flying buttresses, and giant, ornate windows dominate the structure.

And third, as we get closer, I can't help wondering if my eyes are deceiving me or if there are gargoyles—*actual gargoyles*-- protruding from the top of the castle walls. ~~Freaking gargoyles, like in the Hunchback of Notre Dame movie or something.~~ I half ~~expect~~except Quasimodo to be waiting for us when we stop.

It has to be a trick of this weird shadow darkness combined with the lights from the school. Or my already freaked out imagination. Because no one but Harry Potter actually goes to school in an actual castle. Right?

Except as Macy pulls up to the huge gate at the front of the school and enters a code, I realize that neither the light nor my mind are playing tricks on me. Despite the modern security equipment, Katsmere Academy is very much a Gothic castle.

I mean, -of course it is. Why wouldn't it be? I already feel like I'm on a whole different planet than the one where I've spent the first seventeen years of my life. Why shouldn't my new school just reinforce that feeling?

At least there's no drawbridge, I comfort myself as the gate swings open. And no moat. And no dragon guarding the entrance. Just a long, winding driveway that looks like every other prep school driveway I've ever seen, except for the fact that it's covered in snow. Big shock.

"Told you it wouldn't be bad," Macy says as she pulls up to the front of the school with a spray of snow. "We didn't even see a caribou, let alone a wolf."

She's right, so I just nod and pretend I'm not completely overwhelmed.

Pretend like my stomach isn't tied into knots and my whole world hasn't turned upside down.

Pretend like I'm okay.

"Let's get your suitcases up to your room and get you unpacked. It will help you relax."

Macy climbs off the snowmobile, then takes off her helmet and her hat. It's the first time I've seen her without all the cold weather gear and I can't help smiling at her short, rainbow colored hair. It's cut in a short, choppy style that should be smushed and plastered to her head, but instead it looks like she just walked out of a salon. Which matches the rest of her, now that I think about it, considering her whole look kind of shouts cover model for some Alaskan wilderness fashion magazine.

On the other hand, I'm pretty sure my look says I've gone a couple of rounds with an angry caribou. And lost. Not much different from my usual look, to be honest. Just more layers, frizzier curls...and darker circles under my eyes.

Macy makes quick work of unloading my suitcases, and this time I grab two of them. But I only make it a few steps up the very long walk to the castle's front door before I'm struggling to breathe.

Commented [WU35]: Your comment about her noticing her rainbow colored hair at the airstrip disappeared when I changed things around. But this is the first time she's see her without a hat, so this is her first glimpse of her hair. I changed it so the reader realizes that too

Commented [ep36]: If she's that gorgeous and the heroine hasn't seen her in 7 years, this should be mentioned when she first catches sight of her in the parking lot. How different she looks since they last met. Good way to get her age in too, which I mentioned earlier was missing. ☺

Commented [WU37]: But she was all bundled up. This is Grace's first clear look at her cousin without all the winter gear on.

Commented [WU38]:

Commented [WU39]: Added curls in here

“It’s the altitude,” Macy tells me as she takes one of the suitcases out of my hand. “We climbed pretty fast and, since it’s sea level where you’re coming from, it’s going to take a few days for you to get used to how thin the air is up here.”

Just the idea of not being able to breathe sets off the panic I’ve barely been keeping at bay. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath—or as deep as I can out here—and try to fight it back.

In, hold for five seconds, out. In, hold for ten seconds, out. In, hold for five seconds, out. Just like Heather’s mom taught me. Dr. Blake is a therapist, and she’s been giving me tips on how to deal with the panic attacks I’ve been having since my parents died. But I’m not sure her tips are up to combatting all of this; any more than I am.

Still, I can’t stand here frozen like a statue **forever**, especially not when I can feel Macy’s concern even with my eyes closed.

I take one more deep breath and open my eyes, shooting Macy a smile I’m far from feeling. Fake it ‘til you make it is still a thing, right?

“It’s going to be okay,” she tells me, eyes wide with sympathy. “Just stand there a minute and get your breath. I’ll carry your suitcases up to the door.”

“I **can do it.**” —

“Save your breath!” she orders sharply. “And just chill for a minute.”

Her tone warns me not to argue, so I don’t. Especially since the panic attack I’m trying to fend off is only making it harder to breathe. Instead, I nod and watch as she carries my suitcases—one at a time—up to the school’s front door.

As I do, a flash of color way above us catches my eye.

It’s there and gone so fast that even as I scan for it, I can’t be sure it ever really existed to begin with. Except—there it is again. A flash of red in the lit up window of the tallest tower.

Commented [WU40]: Gargoyle hint ☺

Commented [ep41]: Later commented everyone cuts each other off, so just softening that impression where I can.

I don't know who it is or why they even matter, but I stop where I am. Watching. Waiting. Wondering if whoever it is will make another appearance.

It isn't long before they do.

I can't see clearly—distance, darkness and the distorted glass of the windows cover up a lot—but I get the impression of a strong jaw, shaggy, dark hair, a red shirt against a background of light.

It's not much and there's no reason for it to have caught my attention—certainly no reason for it to have *held* my attention—and yet I find myself staring up at the window so long that Macy has all three of my suitcases up the stairs before I even realize it.

“Ready to try again?” she calls down from her spot near the front door.

“Oh, yeah. Of course.” I start up the last thirty or so steps, ignoring the way my head is spinning. Altitude sickness—one more thing I never had to worry about in San Diego.

Fantastic.

I glance up at the window one last time, not surprised at all to find that whoever was looking down at me is long gone. Still, an inexplicable shiver of disappointment works its way through me. It makes no sense, though, so I shrug it off. And as I finally make it up the last of the stairs to the castle's entryway, any thoughts of the mysterious watcher disappear with my fascination of the pointed archways and elaborate stonework and stained glass that is showcased everywhere I look.

“This place is insane,” I tell my cousin as I trail her through the entryway and down the hall to a long, winding staircase. We pass several students on the way and they all look a lot like Macy, sans the multi-colored hair: tall, beautiful, and intimidating af. “I can't believe you go to school here.”

“We *both* go to school here,” she reminds me with a quick grin.

“Yeah, but...” I just got here. And I’ve never felt more out of place in my life.

“But?” she repeats, eyebrows arched.

“It’s a lot.”

“It is.” She slows down until I catch up. “But it’s home.”

“Your home,” I tell her, doing my best not to think of the house I left behind, where my mother’s front porch wind chimes and whirligigs were the most unusual thing about it.

“*Our* home,” she answers, as she pulls out her phone and sends a quick text. “You’ll see. Speaking of which, my dad wants me to give you a choice about what kind of room situation you want.”

“Room situation?” I repeat, glancing around the castle while images of ghosts and animated suits of armor slide through my head. All Harry Potter’s doing, I know, but still. Macy looks so serious, and after the last month, I could really use a bathroom that doesn’t come complete with some Alaskan wilderness version of Moaning Myrtle.

“Dad told me I could show you to your single room. But I really hoped you might want to room with me, though—we can double up in the dorms if we want to, and I **totally** want to—but he said you might need some space to yourself right now.” For a second, the sunshine in her bright blue eyes dims. “Which I totally get. I mean, it’s awful what happened.”

It almost looks like she’s going to cry, which, no. Just no. We’re not going to go there. Not when the only thing currently holding me together is a hefty dose of denial and my ability to compartmentalize.

No way am I going to risk losing my grip on either. Not here, in front of my cousin and the dozen or so other students we've come across milling about since we made it inside. And not now, when it's obvious from all the stares that I'm totally the newest attraction at the zoo.

So instead of melting into Macy for the hug I so desperately need, instead of letting myself think about how much I miss home and my parents and my *life*, I pull back and give her the best smile I can manage. "Why don't you show me to *our* room?"

The concern in her eyes doesn't diminish, but the sunshine definitely makes another appearance. "*Our* room? Really?"

I sigh deep inside and kiss ~~good-bye~~ my dream of a little peaceful solitude goodbye. It's not as hard as it should be, but then I've lost a lot more in the last month than my own space. Choosing my own room when she so obviously wants us to be roommates feels selfish...and mean. "Really. Rooming with you sounds absolutely perfect."

"Awesome!" Macy grins and throws her arms around me for a fast but powerful hug. Then she glances at her phone with a roll of her eyes. "Dad still hasn't answered my text—he's the worst about checking his phone. Why don't you hang out here, and I'll go get him? I know he wanted to see you as soon as we got here."

"I can come with you—"

"Just sit, Grace." She points at the ornate, French provincial style chairs that flank a small chess table in an alcove to the right of the staircase. "Rest. You've had a long trip and the altitude isn't helping. Just relax a minute while I get Dad."

Because she's right—my head is aching and my chest still feels tight—I just nod. Then do what she suggested and plop down in the closest chair. I'm beyond tired and want nothing more than to lean my head back against the wall and close my eyes for a minute. But I'm afraid

Commented [ep42]: this was used in the first chapter also

Commented [WU43]: Changed it 😊

Commented [WU44]: I drive copyeditors nuts, but the fragments thrown in from time to time are deliberate—it's part of my style. I went with some of the ones you changed, but some I want to keep, like this one, if that's okay.

I'll fall asleep if I do. Being the new girl is hard enough without also being the new girl caught snoring and drooling on herself in the middle of the hallway on her very first day...

More to keep myself from drifting off than out of actual interest, I pick up one of the chess pieces in front of me. It's made of intricately carved stone, and my eyes widen as I realize what I'm looking at. A perfect rendition of a vampire, right down to the black cape, frightening snarl, and bared fangs. It matches the gothic castle vibe so well that I can't help being amused.

Curious now, I reach for a piece from the other side. And nearly laugh out loud when I realize it's a dragon—fierce, regal, with giant wings. It's absolutely gorgeous. The whole set is.

I put the dragon down only to pick up another. This one is less fierce, but with its sleepy eyes and folded wings, it's even more intricate. I look it over carefully, fascinated with the level of detail in the piece—everything from the perfect points on the wings to the careful curl of each talon reflects just how much care the artist put into the piece. I've never been a chess girl, but this set just might change my mind.

This time, when I put down the dragon, I go to the other side of the board and pick up the vampire queen. She's beautiful, with long flowing hair and a beautifully decorated cape. ~~and—~~

"I'd be careful with that one, if I were you. She's got a nasty bite." The words are low and dark and so close to my ear that I nearly fall out of the chair. I jump up, plopping the chess piece down with a clatter, and whirl around—heart pounding—only to find myself face to face with the hottest, and most dangerous, guy I've ever seen.

Shiny dark hair that's short in back and long in front, so that the bangs skim low across his razor sharp cheekbones.

Dark eyes that look like they take in everything and feel nothing, surrounded by the longest, most obscene lashes I've ever seen.

Commented [ep45]: She might have broken it and that's super rude of her to be so careless. Is there another way to phrase her whirling around and setting it down more carefully?

Commented [ep46]: here to end of chapter is revised

Full, red lips.

A jaw so sharp it could cut stone.

Alabaster white skin.

Long, lean body.

Not to mention a smile that's a little wicked and a lot wild. He uses it on me, and -just that easily, what little oxygen I've been able to pull into my lungs in this high altitude completely disappears.

Chapter Three

“Are you all right?” he asks, all calm and cool-eyed as I ~~gasp and wheeze and~~ try desperately to pull some air into my starving, aching lungs.

“I’m fine.” I manage to force the words through my freaked out throat. Then, ignoring the look on his face that says he thinks I’m anything but, I continue, “Who’s got a nasty bite?”

He reaches past me and picks up the piece I dropped, holds the queen up for me to see. “She’s not a nice woman.”

“She’s a chess piece.” I stare at him.

His obsidian eyes gleam back. “Your point?”

“My point is, she’s *a chess piece*. She’s not real.”

He inclines his head in a *you never know* gesture. “~~2~~ ‘There are more things in heaven and hell, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’”

“Earth,” I correct before I can think better of it.

He crooks one midnight black brow in question, so I continue. “The quote is, ~~2~~ ‘There are more things in heaven and *Earth*, Horatio.’”

“Is it now?” His face doesn’t change, but there’s something mocking in his tone that wasn’t there before, like I’m the one who made the mistake, not him. But I know I’m right—my AP English class just finished reading Hamlet last month. “I think I like my version better.”

“It’s from when Horatio and Marcellus butt into Hamlet’s conversation with his dead father’s ghost. Horatio sees the ghost, but he doesn’t really believe what he’s seeing, because

ghosts don't exist." I'm just babbling now, throwing a bunch of words around that I'm sure he doesn't care about. And still, I can't seem to stop. "So Hamlet tells him—"

"To never trust a girl who reads Shakespeare?"

I can't tell if he's kidding. His voice is dry, but the smile is long gone and his face is granite hard—.

"That leaves you with a pretty small pool, considering every teenager in the country reads him at least once. Plus, there are about a million different incarnations of his plays on TV right now." I don't even know what I'm saying at this point, but it shows no sign of abating. At least not when he's looking at me like that, lighting all kinds of things up inside of me. "You've probably seen some of them. -Like—"

"Do you ever stop talking?" He sounds both amused and confused. I know how he feels.

"What? No. I mean, yes. I mean—" I break off with a gasp when he puts one long, elegant finger against my lips in an effort to stop the ridiculous flow of words I'm spewing.

"I don't think you know *what* you mean." And then he's leaning toward me, crowding me as much with his presence as with the fact that his face—his mouth—is only a few scant inches from mine. "I won't hold it against you, though. Jetlag can be a bitch."

I don't think I'm jetlagged considering, there's only an hour difference between San Diego and here. And I'd tell him that, except his finger is still on my mouth and I'm pretty sure if I try to talk now, I'll just end up licking him or something equally as embarrassing.

Which is why I don't say anything. But he must understand my dilemma anyway because he's grinning at me as he starts to slide his finger off my mouth. But for a moment—just a moment—his fingertip catches on the inside edge of my bottom lip before it's gone completely. And just that easily, I forget how to breathe again.

Commented [ep47]: I think we should emphasize less. He's not an emphatic guy as he doesn't get emotional or give into drama.

Commented [ep48]: I'm not sure a teenager would do this. Feels like something my creepy uncle would do. hehe

Commented [ep49]: And then to leave it there feels very not YA to me. But if you love it, certainly keep it.

Commented [WU50]: I changed it, then changed it back. Sorry.

Heat slams through me, warming me up for the first time since I opened the door of Philip's plane in Healy. Whether the heat is from his touch or from that black magic voice of his, I don't know.

Maybe both.

Probably both.

I'm pretty sure he doesn't feel the same way, though, considering he's looking at me, like I'm some puzzle he doesn't understand ... and isn't sure he wants to.

The fact that I'm reacting so strongly to him when he doesn't seem to feel anything for me at all is humiliating, so I take one trembling step back. Then I take another one. And another one.

He follows suit, taking one step forward for every step I take backwards, until I'm caught between him and the chess table pressing into ~~digging into~~ the back of my thighs. And even though there's nowhere to go, even though I'm stuck right here in front of him, he leans closer still, *gets* closer still, until I can feel his warm breath on my cheek and the brush of his silky black hair against my skin.

"What are you—" -What little breath I've managed to recover catches in my throat. "What are you doing?"

He holds up the chess piece for me to see again, but this time he reaches past me and pops it onto its spot on the table with a definitive *thud*. Then he takes a step back.

"Oh, right." Embarrassment floods me, along with a disappointment I absolutely refuse to acknowledge. "The queen."

"The queen," he agrees.

Now that I'm not babbling like an idiot, silence stretches between us. It grows more awkward with every second that passes until I can't stand it and end up giving a crazy little laugh, just to break the tension.

As I do, I pray I don't sound as nuts as I feel, but the amused look he gives me tells me that that ship has sailed. Because of course it has.

Nothing to do now but find a graceful way out of this mess—if such a thing even exists.

I drop my head a little, let my long hair fall into my face. "I'm sorry. I—"

"Don't apologize," he interrupts.

"No, I need to. I'm being weird—"

"So what? Be as weird as you want to be. And *never* apologize," he reiterates.

Part of me wonders if he's just saying that to be nice, but he looks so serious that I can't help clarifying. "Never?"

"Never," he agrees.

"But what about if you make a mistake?"

He grins then, and it's a sharp thing—almost as sharp as his jaw and the pointed look in his suddenly ~~obsidian~~ emerald hard eyes. "Especially then."

"I don't understand."

"What's to understand? Apologizing is a sign of weakness."

"Wait a minute." Once again, my voice comes out a little strangled, but that's only because I can't breathe, I tell myself. Only because my heart is beating crazily...from the lack of oxygen, of course. Not because of some guy who doesn't believe in anything as basic as saying he's sorry when he makes a mistake. "Everyone knows acknowledging when you mess up is a sign of strength."

“If you ask me, not screwing up at all is a better sign of strength.”

“That’s nuts. Nobody’s perfect. *Everyone* makes mistakes.”

“~~No, they don’t.~~ That’s just what imperfect people tell themselves so they can sleep at night.”

My mouth drops open at that. Like actually, seriously drops wide open. “You can’t really believe that.”

“Sure I do.”

“Even though it makes you sound like a total ass?”

“Truth is truth,” he says with a shrug.

“You mean opinion is opinion.”

He arches ~~ane~~ dark brow, looks coldly amused. But there’s an intensity in the way he holds himself when he says, “Making mistakes is a luxury some people don’t have,” that convinces me there’s a lot more to this conversation than what he’s letting me see.

Which is why I decide to back off this whole line of questioning and go back to his original words. Arguing with someone is one thing. Arguing with them when there might be a sore spot underneath is something else entirely.

“Even if you don’t make mistakes, everyone has to say they’re sorry at some point. Even if it’s just because something bad happened to someone you care about that isn’t your fault. You can still be sorry it happened to them and saying so can make them feel better.—”

“Oh, yeah? All those sorries you got after your parents’ deaths really made you feel better, hmmm?”

Everything inside me freezes at his words—and the callous tone he uses to say them.

“How do you know about what happened to my parents?”

“Everyone knows.”

That’s another body blow, one that has me reeling even as I tell myself that it makes sense. That my father wasn’t just my father. That he was Uncle Finn’s brother, too. Of course the school community would know what had happened when he took that week off to fly to San Diego to help me arrange the funerals.

Understanding that doesn’t make me feel any better, though. Not when the one thing I was looking forward to about this place was the fact that no one would pity me. No one would think of me as the poor girl whose parents are dead. No one would say ~~they~~ how sorry they were one second and then complain about their own parents two seconds later.

Add in the fact that he knows all this, the fact that he knows who I am and why I’m here...it shouldn’t matter, but it does.

I push him back, hard this time so he knows I mean it. I need space. I need sleep. I need to just breathe.

He knows it, too. I can see it in his eyes as he takes a step back. “Are you okay?” he asks.

Commented [ep51]: Why would this hurt?

“I’m fine,” I tell him, even though I’m not. Even though my head aches and the room is spinning and my mouth has never been drier in my life.

“Are you sure?” He steps closer again, sweeps a hand through his too long dark hair, and as he does, his ~~longish~~ jaw-length bangs part just enough to reveal a scar from the center of his left eyebrow to the left corner of his mouth. It’s thin and white, barely noticeable against the paleness of his skin, but it’s there nonetheless—especially if you look at the wicked V it causes at the end of his dark eyebrow.

It should make him less attractive, should do something—anything—to negate the incredible power of his looks. But somehow the scar only emphasizes the danger, turning him

from just another pretty boy with angelic looks into someone a million times more compelling. A fallen angel with a bad boy vibe for miles...and a million stories to back that vibe up.

Strangely, it also makes him more...human. More relatable despite the darkness that rolls off him in waves. A scar like this only comes from an unimaginably painful injury. Hundreds of stitches, multiple operations, months—maybe even years—of recovery. I hate that he suffered like that, wouldn't wish it on anyone, let alone this boy who frustrates and terrifies and excites me all at the same time. This boy who holds me one minute and shoves me away the next.

He knows I saw the scar—I can see it in the way his eyes narrow. In the way his shoulders stiffen and his hands clench into fists. In the way he ducks his head so that his hair falls over his cheek again.

I hate that, hate that he thinks he has to hide something that he should wear as a badge of honor. It takes a lot of strength to get through something like this, a lot of strength to come out the other side of it, and he should be proud of that strength. Not ashamed of the mark it's left.

I reach out before I make a conscious decision to do it, cup his scarred cheek in my hand.

His dark eyes blaze and for a second I think he's going to shove me away. But in the end, he doesn't. He just stands there and lets me stroke my thumb back and forth across his cheek—across his scar—for several long moments.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, when I can finally get my voice past the painful lump of sympathy in my throat. "This must have hurt horribly."

He doesn't move for one second, two, staring into my eyes. Letting me stare into his. I want to hold him, want to take a little of the pain away that I can see lurking in the corner of his eyes.

But before I can make that final step, before I can wrap my arms around him in a hug something tells me he desperately needs, he takes a big step back. Sneers. Then says, “What would you know about that kind of pain?”

“There are more things in heaven and hell, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” I tell him, deliberately using his earlier misquote.

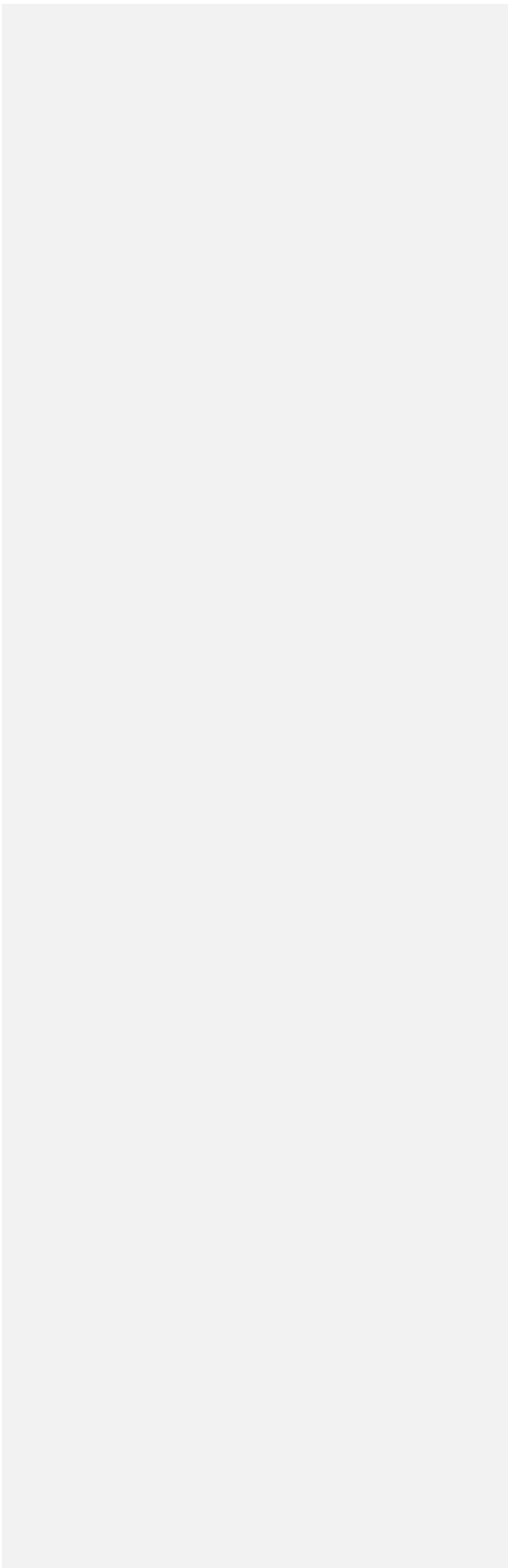
For a second, just a second, something flashes in his eyes. Then he nods, murmurs, “I’m sorry.”

“What?” I ask, clapping a hand to my chest in mock surprise. “Did I just hear what I thought I heard?”

And just that easily the spell is broken. Just that easily the look in his eyes changes from soft to empty. Then he’s inclining his head, watching me the way you might watch a bug...right before you crush it under your shoe. “I said I’m sorry your parents are dead.”

“Oh. Um—” The sarcasm drains out of me as he utters the last words I expect to hear. I stare at him for long moments, eyes wide and heart pounding as I try to find the right words, or any words, for that matter. “I ...”

Regret flashes in his eyes as my voice trails off, regret and pain and something else that looks a lot like shame. I watch as he pushes it back, pushes it down, replaces it with a smirk that gives me chills. And then he says, “Oh, wait. You didn’t actually believe that, did you? When I just told you sorries don’t mean shit?” He shakes his head, gives an empty laugh. ~~“I guess some people really are as naive as they look.”~~ “Word of advice. You better fix that, fast, or Alaska is going to eat you up and not even bother to spit you back out.” Then he just turns and walks away, as if he didn’t just knock a hole in the wall I’ve been so carefully building for the last month.



Chapter Four

“Grace!” My Uncle Finn’s voice booms down the hallway, and I turn toward him instinctively. I smile and give him a little wave even though there’s a part of me that feels frozen in place, before I turn back to tell this jerk—this *freaking douche nozzle*—off once and for all.

Except he’s gone.

I glance around, determined to figure out where he went, but before I can spot him, Uncle Finn is wrapping me in a huge bear hug and lifting me off my feet. I hang on for dear life, letting the comforting scent of him—the same woodsy scent my dad used to have—wash over me.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t meet you at the airport. A couple of kids got hurt, and I had to take care of things here.”

“Yeah, of course. Are they okay?”

“They’re fine.” He shakes his head. “Just a couple of idiots being idiots. You know ~~you~~ how boys are.”

I start to tell him that I have no idea how boys are—my last encounter is proof of that—but some weird instinct warns me not to bring up the guy I was just talking to. So I don’t. Instead, I laugh and nod along.

“Enough about the duties of a headmaster,” he says, pulling me in for another, quicker hug before leaning back to study my face. “How was your trip? And more importantly, how are you?”

“It was long,” I tell him. “But it was fine. And I’m okay.” The phrase of the day.

“I’m pretty sure okay is a bit of an overstatement.” He sighs. “I can only imagine how hard the last few weeks have been for you. I wish I could have stayed longer after the funeral.”

“It’s fine. The estate company you called took care of almost everything. And Heather and her mom took care of the rest. I swear.”

It’s obvious that he wants to say more, but just as obvious that he doesn’t want to get into anything too deep in the middle of the hallway. So in the end, he just nods and says, “Okay, then. I’ll leave you to settle in with Macy. But come see me tomorrow morning, and we’ll talk about your schedule. Plus, I’ll introduce you to our counselor, Dr. Wainwright. I think you’ll like her.”

Right. Dr. Wainwright. The school counselor who was also a therapist, according to Heather’s mom. And not just any therapist. *My* therapist, apparently, since she and my uncle both think I need one. I would argue, but considering I’ve cried in the shower every day for the last month, I figure they might be on to something.

“Okay, sure.”

“Are you hungry? I’ll have dinner sent up, since you missed it. Although—” He narrows his eyes at me. “How are you doing with the altitude?”

“Considering I’ve been nauseous for the last hour? Not great.”

Commented [WU52]: Fixed down below

“Yeah.” He harumphs sympathetically before turning to Macy. “Make sure she takes a couple Advil when she gets to your room. And that she drinks plenty of water. I’ll send some soup and ginger ale up. Let’s keep things light tonight, see how you’re doing in the morning.”

Light sounds perfect, since even the thought of eating right now makes me want to throw up. “Okay, sure.”

“I’m glad you’re here, Grace. And I promise, things will get easier.”

I nod, because what else am I going to do? I'm not glad I'm here—Alaska feels like the moon right now—but I'm all for things getting easier. Because they've been really hard since my parents died, and I just want the chance to take a breath. I just want to go one day without feeling like shit.

Figuring we're done here, I reach for the handle of one of my suitcases. But my uncle says, "Don't worry about those. I'll get one of the guys to—" He breaks off and calls down the hallway. "Hey, Flint! Come here and give me a hand, will you?"

Macy makes a sound halfway between a groan and a death rattle as her father starts down the corridor, presumably trying to catch up with this Flint person.

"Come on, let's go before Dad chases him down." She grabs ~~onto~~ two of my suitcases and practically runs for the stairs.

"What's wrong with Flint?" I ask as I grab my last remaining suitcase and try to keep up with her.

"Nothing! He's great. Amazing. Also, super hot. He doesn't need to see us like this."

I can see how she could think he doesn't need to see *me* like this, since I'm pretty sure I look half dead. But, "You look amazing."

"Umm, no. No, I don't. Now come on. Let's get out of—"

"Hey, Mace. Don't worry about those suitcases. I'll get them for you." ~~The~~ A deep voice booms from several steps below us, and I turn around just in time to see a guy in ~~in~~ ripped jeans and a white T-shirt charging toward me. He's tall—like as tall as that guy I was just talking to—and just as muscular. But that's where the resemblance ends, because everywhere that other guy was dark and cold, this one is light and fire.

Bright green eyes that seem to burn from within.

Dark blonde hair that he keeps super short on the sides but long on top.

Deeply tanned skin.

And perhaps most interesting of all, there's a smile in his eyes that is as different from the other guy's darkness as the stars just outside the windows are from the endless midnight blue of the night sky.

"We've got them," Macy says, but he ignores her, bounding up the stairs three at the time.

He stops next to me first, gently eases the handle of my suitcase from the near death grip I've got on it. "Hey there, New Girl. How are you?"

"I'm okay, just ..."

"She's sick, Flint," my uncle calls from below. "The altitude is getting to her."

"Oh, right." His eyes blaze with sympathy. "That sucks."

"A little bit, yeah."

"Well, come on then, New Girl. Climb on my back. I'll give you a ride up the stairs."

"Oh, no. That's okay." I back away from him a little. "I can walk—"

"Come on." He bends his knees a little to make it easier for me to grab onto his super broad shoulders. "You've got a long three flights ahead of you."

They *are* a long three flights and still I would literally rather die than climb on his back.

"Pretty sure they'll be longer for you if you're carrying me."

"Nah. You're so little I won't even notice. Now are you going to get on or am I going to pick you up and toss you over my shoulder?"

"You wouldn't," I tell him.

"Try me."

I start to do just that, but the threat of being carried up the stairs like a sack of flour changes my mind. Well, that and the amused gleam in his eyes that says he would love the chance to do just that.

Plus, not going to lie, with the way the room is starting to spin, the thought of climbing all those stairs on my own seems pretty daunting. While getting a piggyback ride may call more attention to myself than I'm comfortable with, I'm pretty sure taking a swan dive down the stairs will do a whole lot worse.

Add in the fact that my uncle seems okay with the whole thing, I just nod and say, "Okay. But if I get heavy, you need to promise you'll put me down."

"You won't."

"You don't know that. And if I do—"

"Yeah, yeah. If you start to drag me down, I'll put you down before I drop you. Sound good?"

"Umm, yes. Very good." I take a deep breath, start to climb on his back. "I'm Grace, by the way."

"Yeah, I know. I'm Flint." He reaches behind himself, puts his hands on my thighs and boosts me up his back until I feel secure. "Don't forget to lock your legs around my waist so you don't fall off. I need my hands free for your bags."

"Oh, don't worry about the suitcases," Macy says, her voice about three octaves higher than it normally is. "I can get them."

"No doubt, Mace." He winks at her. "But you might as well use me if I'm volunteering." Then he grabs two of the bags and starts up the stairs.

He's moving fast—way faster than I would expect considering how weighed down he is—and I hold on for dear life. Guess all those muscles under his shirt aren't just for show.

~~Four~~ Only minutes later we're up all three flights of stairs, waiting at the top for Macy who is huffing and puffing her way up the final few steps.

"You can let me down now," I tell him as I start to unwind my legs from around his waist.

"Just wait," he says, grabbing onto of my legs, suitcase and all. "It's like two minutes to your room. Let me get you there."

"I'm fine now."

"Yeah, until you pass out and pitch over the railings. **Nope, Finn** put me in charge of getting you to your room safely and that is what I am going to do."

I start to argue, but he cuts me off by turning around and calling out, "You okay there, Mace?"

"Just great," she gasps, all but throwing my suitcase the final few feet.

"Told you I could have taken it," Flint tells her.

"It's not the weight of the suitcase," she snipes back. "It's how fast I had to carry it."

"I've got longer legs." He glances around. "So, which hallway am I taking her to?"

"We're in the North wing," Macy says, pointing to the hallway directly to our left.

"Follow me."

Despite all her huffing and puffing, she takes off at a near run, with Flint hot on her heels. As we race across the landing, I've never been more grateful for a piggyback ride in my life. I've always thought I was in pretty good shape, but life in Alaska obviously takes fit to a whole new level.

Commented [WU53]: I kind of think they all do. Or is that too Legacies? I mean, these are seriously powerful beings here. Not sure Mr. really cuts it. What do you think?

Commented [ep54]: Would he refer to the headmaster by his first name like this?

There are four sets of double doors surrounding the landing—all heavy, carved wood—and Macy stops at the set marked North. Before she can reach for the handle, the door flies open so fast that she barely manages to jump back before it hits her.

“Hey, what was that ab—” She breaks off when four guys walk through the door like she’s not even there. All four are dark and brooding and sexy af, but I’ve only got eyes for one of them. The jerk from downstairs.

He doesn’t have eyes for me, though. Instead, he walks right by—face blank and eyes gaze glacier cold—like I’m not even there. Like he doesn’t even see me, even though he has to skirt Flint to get by. Even though he spent fifteen minutes talking to me earlier. Even though he acted like an ass and then ran away before I could call him on it.

Except...except, as he passes, his shoulder brushes against the side of my arm. Even after what he said, heat sizzles through me at the contact. And though logic tells me the touch was accidental, I can’t shake the idea that he did it on purpose. Any more than I can stop myself from turning to watch him walk away.

Just because I’m angry, I assure myself. Just because I want the chance to tell him off.

Macy doesn’t say anything to him, or the other guys, and neither does Flint. Instead, they wait for them to be out of the way and then head down the hallway like nothing happened. Like we didn’t just get blatantly snubbed.

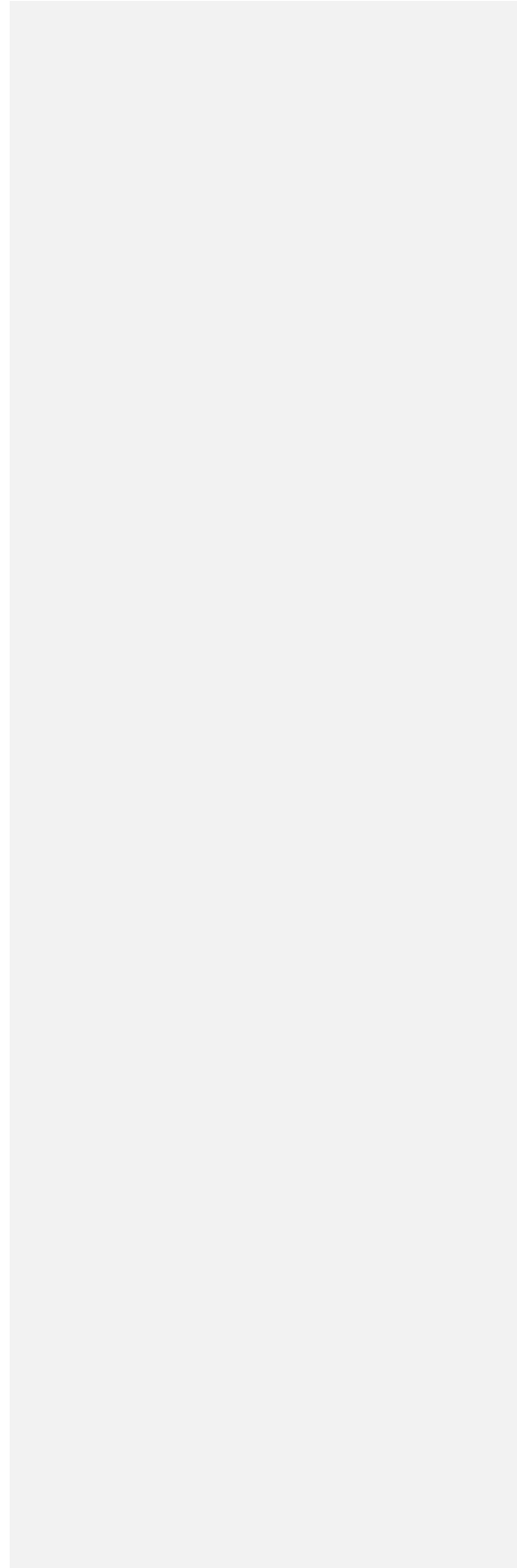
I want to ask who they are—want to ask who he is so I finally have a name to go with his insane body and even more insane face—but now doesn’t feel like the time. So I keep my mouth shut and concentrate on looking around instead of obsessing over some jerk I don’t even like.

The North hallway is lined with heavy wooden doors on both sides, most with some kind of decoration hanging on them. Dried roses in the shape of an X on one, what looks to be an

elaborate dream catcher on another, and a ton of bat stickers all over a third. I can't decide if the person living there has dreams of being a chiropterologist or if they are simply a fan of Batman...

Either way, I'm absurdly fascinated by all the decorations—especially the oversized dreamcatcher—and not at all surprised when Macy stops at the most elaborately adorned door of them all. A garland of fresh flowers winds its way around the door frame and lines of threaded, multi-colored crystals fall from the top of the door to the bottom in a fancy kind of beaded curtain.

"Here we are," Macy says as she throws the door open with a flourish. "Home sweet home."



Chapter Five

“Which bed is hers?” Flint asks as he carries me over the threshold.

“The one on the right,” Macy answers. Her voice is back to sounding funny, so I glance over my shoulder to make sure she’s okay.

She looks okay, but her eyes are huge and they keep darting from Flint to the rest of the room and back again. I give her a what’s up look, but she just shakes her head in the universal sign for *don’t-say-ANYTHING*. So I don’t.

Instead, I look around the room I’m going to share with my cousin for the next several months. It only takes a couple seconds for me to figure out that no matter what she said about being okay with me having my own room, she had planned on me rooming with her all along. For starters, all of her possessions are arranged neatly on one rainbow colored side of the room. And for another, the spare bed is already made up in—of course—hot pink sheets and a hot pink comforter with huge, white hibiscus flowers all over it.

“I know you like surfing,” she says, watching me eye the very bright comforter in the classic floral surf pattern. “I thought you might like something that reminds you of home.”

That shade of pink reminds me of surfer Barbie more than it reminds me of home, but no way am I going to say that to her. “Thanks. It’s really nice.”

“It’s definitely cheerful,” Flint says as he carries me over to the bed. The look he gives me is totally tongue-in-cheek, but that only makes me like him more. The fact that he realizes

Commented [ep55]: Again, can drop off luggage instead. It’s super awk he’s just still carrying her around. Lol I know YOU know he’s a dragon but no one else knows at this point. Here, it’s just a boy in high school carrying you, the reader, around on his back...and by now, you’re wanting to die of embarrassment. ;)

Commented [WU56]: I still don’t think it’s a big deal. I checked with two of my three sons (16 and 22) and they said they would totally insist on carrying the girl all the way to her bed. It’s the safest place to deposit her if you’re really tall (as they are).

how absurd Macy's decorating choices are but is way too nice to say anything that might hurt her feelings totally works for me. If I'm lucky, maybe I've made another friend.

He drops my suitcases at the foot of the bed, then sits on the bed himself so that I can climb off his back without any fuss. Which is a good thing considering the altitude still has my head spinning a little.

"Do you guys need anything else before I head out?" Flint asks after we are completely disentangled.

"I'm good," I tell him. "Thanks for the ride."

"Any time, New Girl." He flashes me a ten-thousand-kilowatt smile. "Any time."

I'm pretty sure Macy whimpers a little at the sight of that grin, but she doesn't say anything. Just kind of walks to the door and smiles weakly as she waits for him to leave. Which he does with a little wave for me and a fist bump for her on his way out.

"You've got a crush on Flint," I tell her the second the door is closed, and locked, behind him.

"I don't!" she says, looking wildly at the door, like he can hear us through the thick wood.

"Oh, yeah? Then what was all that about then?"

"All what?"

"You know." I wring my hands, bat my eyes, give a halfway decent imitation of the sounds she's been making since her father flagged down Flint for help.

"I don't sound like that."

"You totally sound like that," I tell her. "But I don't get it. If you like him, why didn't you try to talk to him more? I mean, it was like a perfect opportunity,"

“I don’t *like* him like him. I don’t!” she insists with a laugh when I give her a look. “I mean, yeah, he’s gorgeous and nice and super smart, but I’ve got a boyfriend who I really care about. It’s just, Flint is just so... *Flint*. You know? And he was in our *room*, sitting on your *bed*.” She sighs. “The mind boggles.”

“Don’t you mean implodes?” I tease.

“Whatever.” She rolls her eyes. “It’s not a real crush. It’s more like...”

“More like the aura surrounding the most popular boy in school?”

“Yes, that! Exactly that. Except Flint’s not quite that high on the list. Jaxon and his group have the top positions pretty much sewn up.”

“Jaxon?” I ask, trying to sound casual even as my whole body goes on high alert. I don’t know how I know she’s talking about *him*, but I do. “Who’s Jaxon?”

“Jaxon Vega.” She fake swoons. “I have *no* idea how to explain Jaxon to you since you haven’t met him but... Oh, wait! You saw him.”

“I did?” I try to ignore the way pterodactyls suddenly take up residence in my stomach.

“Yeah, on the way to our room. He was one of the guys who nearly hit me in the face with the door.”

“The ones who completely ignored us?”

“Yeah.” She laughs. “Don’t take it personally, though. That’s just the way Jaxon is. He’s...angsty.”

He’s a lot more than angsty, if our conversation a little while ago is anything to go by. But I’m not about to bring what happened up to Macy when I don’t even know how I feel about it yet.

So I do the only thing I can do. I change the subject. “Thanks so much for getting me a comforter and everything. I appreciate it.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it.” She waves it away. “It was no big deal.”

“I’m pretty sure it *was* a big deal. I don’t know that many companies that deliver to Alaska.”

She blushes a little and looks away, like she’s not sure how to answer. But then she just shrugs and says, “Yeah, well, my dad knows all of them. It wasn’t a problem.”

“Still, you’re totally my favorite cousin.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m your only cousin.”

“Doesn’t mean you aren’t also my favorite.”

“My dad uses that line. You know that, right?”

“That you’re his favorite cousin?” I tease.

“You know what I mean.” She sighs in obvious exasperation. “You’re a dork, you know that?”

“I absolutely do.”

She laughs, even as she crosses to the mini-fridge next to her desk. “Here, drink this,” she says as she pulls out a large bottle of water and tosses it to me. “And I’ll show you the rest.”

“The rest?”

“Yeah. There’s more.” She crosses to one of the closets and pulls the doors open. “I figured your wardrobe wasn’t exactly equipped for Alaska, so I supplemented a little.”

“A little is an understatement, don’t you think?”

Lined up inside of the closet are several -black skirts and pants, along with several white and black blouses, a bunch of black or red polo shirts, two black blazers and two red and black

plaid scarves. There are also several lined hoodies, a few thick sweaters, a heavy jacket, and two more pairs of snow pants—none of which are in hot pink, thankfully. On the floor are several pairs of new shoes and snow boots, along with a large box of what looks like books and school supplies.

“There are socks and thermal underwear and some fleece shirts and pants in the drawers. I figure moving here is hard enough. I didn’t want you to have to worry about anything extra.”

And just like that, she manages to knock down the first line of my defenses. Tears bloom in my eyes and I look away, blinking quickly in an effort to hide what a disaster I am.

It obviously doesn’t work, because Macy makes a small exclamation of dismay. She’s across the room in the blink of an eye, pulling me into a coconut scented hug that seems incongruous here at the center of Alaska. It’s also strangely comforting.

“It sucks, Grace. The whole thing just totally sucks, and I wish I could make it better. I wish I could just wave a wand and make everything back the way it used to be.”

I nod because there’s a lump in my throat. And because there’s nothing else to say. Except that I wish for that, too.

I wish that the last words my parents and I spoke weren’t hurled at each other in a fight that seems so stupid now.

I wish that my dad hadn’t lost control of the car two hours later and driven himself and my mother right off a cliff, plunging hundreds of feet into the ocean.

Most of all, I wish that I could smell my mother’s perfume or hear the deep rumble of my father’s voice just one more time.

Commented [ep57]: It would be great if there was a color style of tie for boys and scarf for girls that we could actually find and put into the blogger boxes. Something that screams you’re part of this school like the scarves do in HP.

Commented [WU58]: Oooooooh. That’s a fabulous idea.

I let Macy hug me as long as I can stand it—which is only about thirty seconds or so—and then I pull away. I've never particularly liked being touched and it's only gotten worse since my parents died.

Commented [ep59]: Love this as we build up that she's different but what is she.

"Thanks for—" I gesture to the bed and closet. "All of this."

"Of course. And I want you to know, if you ever need to talk or whatever, I'm here. I know it's not the same, because my mom left, she didn't die." She swallows hard, takes a deep breath before continuing. "But I know what it's like to feel alone. And I'm a good listener."

She's the first one besides Heather and her mom who don't shy away from the word. The fact that she is makes it so much easier to say, "Thank you," and mean it, even as I remember that Jaxon didn't shy away from it either. He might have been a jackass all the way around, but he called my parents' death what it was. And didn't treat me like I was going to shatter under the weight of one harsh word.

Commented [ep60]: And Jaxon.

Maybe that's why I'm still thinking about him when I should write him off for the jerk he is.

She nods, watching me out of worried eyes that only make me feel worse.

"I should probably get unpacked." I look down at my suitcases with distaste. It feels like I just packed them. The last thing I want to do is empty them right now. Not when my electric pink bed is calling me like a beacon.

"Don't worry about unpacking tonight." She points at a door across the room. "Why don't you go take a shower and get into your pajamas? I'll check on the soup my dad says he was going to have sent up. Then you can eat, take some Advil, and get some rest. Hopefully, when you wake up, you'll be better acclimated to the altitude."

“That sounds...” I trail off because I want to argue with her since it seems rude to go to bed at seven-thirty, after having just gotten here. But I really do feel crappy and a shower sounds amazing. As does sleep, considering I’ve been so nervous about the move that I haven’t gotten much in the last week or so.

“Perfect, right?” she fills in the blank.

“It really does, yeah.”

“Good.” She stands me up, walks me toward the bathroom with her hands on my shoulders. “Go take a shower. I’ve got all kinds of shower gel and shampoo in there, so use whatever you want. You’ll see the towels on the shelf.”

“Thanks, Macy.” I turn to look at her. “I mean it.”

“You’re welcome. Now go.”

She shoos me the last several feet to the bathroom and I go, stripping my clothes off as soon as the door is closed behind me.

I turn on the shower on autopilot, check to make sure the water is hot the same way. I do a quick wash with Macy’s coconut scented shower gel, deciding my hair can wait until the morning simply because I don’t have the energy to dig out my diffuser and blow it dry tonight.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m out of the shower and dressed in my favorite pair of pajamas—a Harry Styles T-shirt from his first solo tour, and a pair of blue fleece pants with white and yellow daisies all over them.

Macy oohs and aaahs over the concert T—as she should—but other than that, she pretty much leaves me alone. Except to make sure I drink an entire thirty-two ounce bottle of water *and* take the Advil she left on my nightstand.

There's a bowl of chicken noodle soup on my nightstand too, but right now I don't have the energy to eat. Instead, I climb into bed and pull the hot pink covers over my head

The last thing I think about before drifting off to sleep is that—despite everything—tonight is the first time I've taken a shower without crying since my parents died...

Chapter Six

I wake up slowly, head fuzzy and body as heavy as stone. It takes me a second to remember where I am—Alaska—and that the light snores that fill the room belong to Macy and not Heather, whose room I've been crashing in for the last three weeks.

I sit up slowly, trying to ignore the unfamiliar howls and roars—and even the occasional animalistic scream—in the distance. It's enough to freak anyone out, let alone a girl born and

raised in the city, but I comfort myself by remembering there's a giant castle between me and all of the animals making those noises...

Still, if I'm being honest, it isn't the utter foreignness of this place that has my brain racing overtime. Yes, being in Alaska is bizarre on what feels like every level. But once I banish thoughts of my old life, it isn't Alaska that woke me up at—I glance at the clock—three-twenty-three in the morning. And it's not Alaska that's keeping me awake.

It's him.

Jaxon Vega.

I don't know anything more about him than I did when he left me standing in the hallway, tears I refused to let him see burning the backs of my eyelids—except that he's the most popular guy at Katsmere Academy. And that he's angsty, which ... no kidding. But seriously, nothing Macy told me matters because I've decided I don't want to know any more about him.

More, I don't want to know him.

Yet when I close my eyes, I can still see him so perfectly. His clenched jaw. The thin scar that runs the length of his face. The black ice of his eyes that let me see for a second—just a second—that he knows as much about pain as I do. Maybe more.

It's that pain I think of most as I sit here in the dark. That pain that makes me worry for him when I shouldn't give a damn about him.

I wonder how he feels about the pain. Wonder how it is he got that scar. However it happened, it had to have been awful. Painful. Terrifying. Traumatic.

I can't help pondering if that's why he's so cold. If that's why he puts such distance between himself and others. Or does the scar make people distance themselves from him?

Commented [ep61]: Seems like a sad reason to wake up thinking about him. This would be stronger if again we play on that shared pain they both keep hidden from the world.

Commented [WU62]: I think the way I changed it clarifies my intentions better. That's not what's keeping her up. It's just what she has learned about him since they're meeting. And I added in the pain down below, as you asked.

It's an awful thought, but one I can totally relate to. Except for Heather, most of my old friends drifted away after my parents died. Heather's mom told me it was because my parents' deaths reminded them of their own mortality, reminded them that their parents could die at any time. And so could they.

Logically, I knew that she was right, that they were just trying to protect themselves the only way they knew how. But that didn't make the distance any less painful. And it definitely didn't make the loneliness any easier to bear.

Reaching for my phone, I shoot off a couple quick texts to Heather—which I should have done as soon as I got here last night—telling her that I'm safe and explaining about the altitude sickness.

Then I lay back down, try to will myself to go back to sleep. But I'm wide awake now, thoughts of Alaska and school and Jaxon blurring together in my head until all I want is for them to just stop.

But they don't stop, and suddenly my heart is pounding, my skin prickling with awareness. I press a hand to my chest, take a couple deep breaths, try to figure out what has me so alarmed I can barely breathe.

And suddenly it's all right there. My parents, the classes I'm supposed to start on Monday, leaving San Diego and my friends, that ridiculous airplane ride into Healy, Macy's expectations for our friendship, the way Jaxon looked at me and then the way he didn't look at me, the things he said to me, the insane amount of clothes I have to wear here to keep warm, the fact that I'm essentially trapped in this castle by the cold.... It all kind of melds together into one great big carousel of fear and regret, whirling through my brain. No thoughts are clear, no images stand out from any of the others—only an overwhelming feeling of impending doom.

The last time I freaked out **like this**, Heather's mom told me that experiencing overwhelming emotions is completely normal after losing my mom and dad. The crushing weight on my chest, the swirling thoughts, the shaking hands, the feeling that the world is going to come crashing in on me. All completely normal. She's a therapist, so she should know, but it doesn't feel normal right now. It feels terrifying.

I know I should stay where I am—this castle is gigantic, and I have no idea where anything is—but I'm smart enough to know if I stay here staring at the ceiling I'm going to end up having a full blown panic attack, and that isn't going to help anyone. Instead, I slip my feet into my tennis shoes and grab my hoodie on my way out the door.

Back home, I'd go for a run when I couldn't sleep, even if it was three in the morning. But here, that's out of the question. Not just because it's cold as death outside, but because God only knows what wild animal is waiting for me out there in the middle of the night. I haven't been lying in bed listening to the roars and howls for the last half an hour for nothing.

But it's a big castle, with long hallways. I may not be able to run through them, but I can at least go exploring for a while. See what I find.

I carefully close the door behind me—the last thing I want to do is wake Macy up when she's been so nice to me—then head down the hallway toward the stairs.

It's creepier than I expect it to be. I would have thought the hallways would be all lit up in the middle of the night, safety protocols and all that, but instead they're dim. Like *just enough light to see imaginary shadows sweeping along the corridors* dim.

For a second, I think about going back into my room and forgetting about the whole walk/explore the castle thing. But just the thought has the merry-go-round starting in my brain again, and that's the last thing I can handle right now.

My phone has a flashlight app, though. Surely that will light up things in here enough for me to find my way around. I swipe through until I find it and turn it on. Suddenly the shadows disappear, and it looks like any other hallway. If you discount the rough stone walls and old-fashioned tapestries, I mean.

I have no idea where I'm going, only that I want to get off the dorm floor. I can barely stand the thought of dealing with Macy right now—dealing with anyone else seems blatantly impossible.

I make it to the long, circular staircase without a problem and take the steps two at a time, all the way down to the ground floor. After my shower last night, Macy mentioned that's where the cafeteria is, along with the library and a number of the classrooms. There are other classrooms in buildings around the grounds, but most of the core classes are taught here, inside the castle, which I am all for. The less I have to be out in that insane weather, the better.

Down here, the hallways are lined with more tapestries, worn and faded with age. My favorite stretches for yards and is crazy colorful. Purples and pinks, greens and yellows, all woven together with no apparent rhyme or reason—except as I step back and shine my flashlight on a wider swath of it, I realize there *is* a pattern. This is an artistic rendering of the Aurora Borealis—the northern lights.

I've always wanted to see them and somehow, in all the pain and angst of moving to Alaska, I totally forgot that I'll pretty much have a front row seat to them out here. The thought has me looking around for a window, wondering if I can just glance outside and see them.

But it turns out the castle doesn't have many windows and the ones it does have are covered in heavy drapes or shutters. It makes sense—anything to keep the cold out—but I am

strangely disappointed. It would have been nice to have one happy thing to take into tomorrow, one thing that doesn't make me feel terrified about being here.

It's that thought that galvanizes me, that has me walking back toward the entryway and the giant set of double doors that lead to the front courtyard. I'm not stupid enough to go traipsing around in the snow in my hoodie and pajama bottoms, but maybe I can stick my head out, see if I can see any lights in the sky.

It's a crazy idea—I should just head up to bed and save the aurora borealis for another night—but now that it's in my brain, I can't shake it. My dad used to tell me stories about the northern lights and they've always been a bucket list item for me. Now that I'm this close, I can't *not* take a look.

I use my flashlight to negotiate my way back down the hall. Once there, I hold it up so I can unlock the doors, but before I can do more than locate the first one, both doors fly open. And in walk two guys wearing nothing but old school concert t-shirts, jeans and lace up boots. No jackets, no sweaters, no hoodies even. Just ripped jeans, Motley Crue, and Timberlands. It's the craziest thing I've ever seen, and for a second, I can't help wondering if this castle—like Hogwarts—come's equipped with its very own ghosts. Ones who died at an eighties rock concert ...

“Well, well, well. Looks like we made it back just in time,” says the taller of the two guys. He's got platinum blond hair tied back in a ponytail and a black nose ring right through his septum. “What are you doing out of bed, Grace?”

“How do you know my name?”

He laughs. “You're the new girl, aren't you? Everybody knows *your* name. *Grace*.” He takes a step closer and I would swear he was sniffing me, which is completely bizarre. And also

Commented [ep63]: I feel like they should be wearing ripped up t-shirts too. It's TOO weird they'd be shirtless for her not to question things, which she doesn't.

Commented [WU64]: ok

not ghost-like behavior. “Now how about you answer my question? What are you doing out of bed?”

Commented [ep65]: Should he comment here that she smells interesting?

Commented [WU66]: I don’t think so. But I’ll add something down below to further the whole what is she thing

I don’t tell him about the northern lights—especially since I get a glimpse of the sky before he closes the door and it’s just the regular black sprinkled with stars you can see almost anywhere in the world. The full moon lights things up a little bit, but there are no colors streaking across the sky, no lime greens or lilac pinks or any of the other colors the northern lights bring with them. It’s just one more disappointment in a long string of them.

“I was thirsty,” I lie badly, wrapping my arms around my waist in an effort to combat the cold gust of wind that came in with them and still lingers in the air around us. “Just wanted to get some water.”

“And did you find any?” says the second guy. He’s shorter than the first, and stockier too. Plus, his black hair is shaved into a buzzcut.

It seems like an innocuous enough question, except he’s walking toward me as he asks it, getting into my personal space until I have to decide whether to stand my ground or back up.

I decide to back up, mostly because I don’t like the way he’s looking at me. And because each step I take backward gets me closer to the stairs and—hopefully—my room.

“I did, thanks,” I lie again, trying to sound unconcerned. “I’m just going to head back to bed now.”

“Before we even get a chance to get to know you? That doesn’t seem very polite, does it, Marc?” the dark haired one asks.

“It doesn’t, no,” Marc answers, and now he’s really close, too. “Especially since Finn’s been up our asses about you for weeks now.”

Commented [ep67]: Would they address the headmaster this way?

“What does that mean?” I demand, forgetting to be afraid for a second.

“It means we’ve had three different meetings about you, all warning us to be on our best behavior. It’s annoying as hell. Right, Quinn?”

“Absolutely. If he’s that worried about you being here, I don’t know why he didn’t just leave you wherever you came from.” Quinn reaches out, yanks **one of my curls**, hard. I want to pull away, want to shove him back and yell at him to leave me alone.

Commented [ep68]: Have you mentioned her curly hair before? I don’t remember it so this feels startling. Like my picture of her in my head was woefully wrong.

Commented [WU69]: It’s mentioned a couple places above now. I added it in and so did you.

But there’s trouble here. I can feel it, just like I can feel the barely leashed violence rolling off these guys in waves. It’s like they’re desperate to hurt someone, desperate to rip someone apart. I don’t want that someone to be me.

“What do you think, Grace?” Marc sneers. “You think you can handle Alaska? Because I’m pretty sure it’s going to naturally unselect you pretty damn quick.”

“I’m just...trying to get by until graduation. I don’t want any trouble.”

“Trouble?” Quinn laughs, but it’s completely devoid of humor. “Do we look like trouble to you?”

They look like the definition of trouble. Like, if I looked trouble up in the dictionary, their pictures would be right there, front and center. I don’t say that though. I don’t say anything, actually, as my brain races to figure out a way out of this whole crazy situation. Part of me thinks I must be dreaming, because this feels like a scene out of every teen movie ever, where the school bullies decide to gang up on the new kid just to show her who’s boss.

But this is real life, not the movies, and I have no delusions that I’m the boss out here or anywhere. I want to tell them that, but right now answering them feels like acquiescence and that’s the last thing you’re supposed to do when dealing with a bully. The more you give them, the more they try to take.

“So, tell me, Grace. Have you had a chance to see the snow yet?” Mark asks, and suddenly he’s way too close for comfort. “I bet you’ve never even seen snow before.”

“I saw plenty of snow on the way up here.”

“On the back of a snowmobile? That doesn’t count, does it, Quinn?”

“No.” Quinn shakes his head hard enough to make his ridiculous ponytail bounce. “You definitely need to get closer. Show us what you can do.”

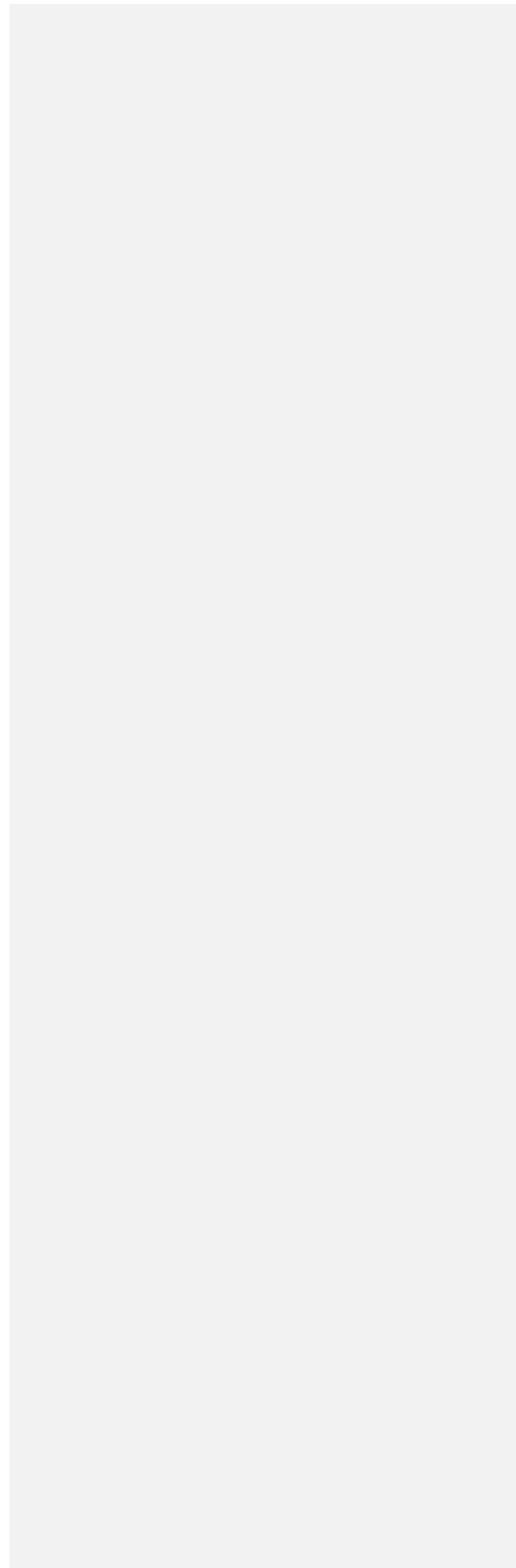
“What I can **do**?” I have no idea what they’re talking about.

Commented [WU70]: Added this in

“I mean, it’s obvious you’ve got something going on.” This time when he breathes in, I’m sure Marc is smelling me. “I just can’t quite figure out what it is.”

“Right?” Quinn agrees. “Me neither, but there’s definitely something there. So let’s see what you’ve got, *Grace*.”

He shifts, braces himself, and that’s when it hits me. What they’re planning on doing. And just how much danger I’m really in.



Chapter Seven

I whirl around, adrenaline pumping, and make a break for the stairs. But Marc reaches out and grabs me before I make it more than a few yards. He yanks me back hard against him—my back to his front—and wraps his arms around me as I start to struggle in earnest.

“Let me go!” I shout, bringing my heel back to kick him in the knees. But I don’t have much leverage and he doesn’t so much as wince.

I think about stomping on his feet, but my Converse aren’t going to do much damage to his boots, let alone his feet inside of them. “Let me go or I’ll scream!” I tell him, trying—and failing—not to sound scared.

“Go ahead,” he tells me as he wrestles me toward the front door Quinn is conveniently holding open for him. “No one will care.”

I jerk my head back, slam it against his chin, and he curses, jerks one of his arms up to try to hold my head in place. Which infuriates me as much as it terrifies me. Bending down, I bite his arm as hard as I can.

He yelps and jerks, and his forearm slams against my mouth. It hurts, has the metallic taste of blood pooling in my mouth. Which only pisses me off more.

“Stop!” I shout, bucking and kicking against him as hard as I can. I can’t let them get me out the door, I can’t. I’m dressed in nothing but a hoodie and a pair of fleece pants and it’s no more than ten degrees Fahrenheit out there. With my thin California blood, I won’t last more than fifteen minutes without getting frostbite or hypothermia—if I’m lucky.

But he still doesn't let go, his arms like bands of steel around me.

"Let me go!" I yell again, this time not caring who I wake up. In fact, hoping that I wake up someone. Anyone. At the same time, I slam my head back as hard as I can, aiming to break his nose.

I must hit something because he lets me go with a curse. I hit the ground, hard, my legs buckling so that I end up on my knees just in time to see Marc go flying across the entryway, eyes wide as he slams, hard, into the farthest wall.

I don't have time to think about how that happened, though, because it only takes a second for him to recover, and then he's charging back across the foyer, straight at me. I turn to flee, fists up in an attempt to ward off Quinn if he tries to stop me, but then he's flying across the foyer, too. He slams into a bookshelf instead of a wall and a vase falls off the top shelf and slams onto the top of his head.

I turn around, looking for a way out, but Marc moves fast—really fast—and suddenly he's there, between me and the staircase. I twist to the right, trying to decide my best bet to get away, and that's when I run straight into a solid wall of muscle.

Shit. There's three of them now? Panic races through me and I reach out, try to shove whoever it is backward. But like Marc, this guy doesn't move. At least not until he wraps his hand around my wrist and tugs me forward hard enough to lift me straight off the ground.

It's as I'm flying past him that I get my first good look at his face and realize that it's *Jaxon*.

I don't know whether I should be relieved or even more afraid.

At least not until he yanks me behind him, putting himself between me and Quinn and Marc as he faces them down.

“Is there a problem here?” he asks. His voice is lower than before, and more gravelly. It’s also colder than the snowdrifts right outside the front door.

“No problem,” Marc says with a forced chuckle. “We were just getting to know the new girl.”

“Is that what they call attempted murder these days? Getting to know someone?” He doesn’t raise his voice, doesn’t do anything the least bit threatening. And still all three of us wince as we wait for the other shoe to drop.

“We wouldn’t have hurt her, man,” Quinn pipes up for the first time. He sounds a lot whinier than he did a few minutes ago, when it was just me and them. “We were just going to lock her outside for a few minutes.”

“Yeah,” Marc adds. “It was just a stupid prank. No big deal.”

“Just a prank, huh?” Jaxon inquires, and somehow his voice has turned even colder. “Then I’m imagining the smell of blood right now?”

I’m not sure what he’s talking about—I’m not bleeding anywhere that I know of—but his words have Quinn and Marc cowering that much more. Not to mention looking a little sick to their stomachs.

“We’re sorry, Jaxon. We just came in off a run and things got a little out of hand.”

“I’m not the one you should be apologizing to.” He half turns, holds out a hand to me. I shouldn’t take it. Every ounce of self-defense training I’ve ever had says I should run. That I should take the reprieve he—Jaxon—is offering me and make a mad dash for my room.

But the way he’s holding out his hand, the way he’s looking at me, the way my heart is beating way too fast right now...none of that is fear-inducing. Yes, he was a total jerk earlier, but tonight he saved me. Tonight, he put himself between those guys and me.

He won't hurt me...at least not physically.

And so I do what he is silently asking and step forward. I don't take his hand—that's a little too much after what he said and did earlier—but I move forward, knowing as I do that Jaxon won't let Marc or Quinn do anything else to me.

I must move forward too much for his liking, however, because he shifts himself partially in front of me again, even as he shoots Quinn and Marc a look that warns them to behave.

The warning might be unnecessary, though, because they're both looking pretty shamefaced.

"We're sorry, Grace." Marc speaks first. "That was totally uncool of us. We didn't mean to scare you."

I don't say anything because I'm sure as hell not going to tell them what they did to me is okay. And I'm not brave enough to tell them to go to hell, even with Jaxon acting as my shield. So I do the only thing I can do. I stare stonily at them and will their farce of an apology to be over so I can finally go back to my room.

"Yeah," Quinn adds. "You know how it is. We just came in from hunting and—"

"Hunting?" I'm so surprised that I can't stop myself from repeating the word.

"Yeah, you know." He waves a hand at the ceiling. "You know, the moon is doing its thing, so ..."

The moon is doing its thing? I have no idea what that means, and honestly, I don't care. I'm so over this place and everyone in it. Except Macy and Uncle Finn and—maybe, just maybe—Jaxon.

"I'm going to bed." I turn to go, but Jaxon's hand is back on my wrist.

“Wait. Please.” They’re the first words he’s ~~ever~~ spoken to me since the whole apology debacle from earlier, and they halt me in my tracks more surely than his hand around my wrist.

“Why?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer. Instead he turns back to Marc and Quinn and says, “This isn’t over.”

They nod, but they don’t say anything else. His words must be a dismissal as well as a threat, though, because they take off down the hall, running faster than I’ve ever seen anyone move.

We both watch them go, and then Jaxon turns to me. For long seconds, he doesn’t say anything, just looks me over from head to toes, his dark eyes cataloguing every inch of me. Not going to lie. It makes me a little uncomfortable. Not in the same way that Quinn and Marc made me uncomfortable, like they were looking for a weakness to exploit. It’s more a wow, did it suddenly get hot in here kind of uncomfortable. And I have no idea how I feel about that considering how he acted earlier.

“Are you okay?” he asks quietly, his fingers finally releasing their hold on my wrist.

“I’m fine,” I tell him, even though I’m not sure it’s true. What kind of place is this where people try to shove you outside to *die* as a prank?

“You don’t look fine.”

That stings a little, even though I know he’s not wrong. “Yeah, well, it’s been a crappy couple of days.”

“I bet.” His eyes are serious when he looks at me, his expression grave. “You don’t have to worry about Marc and Quinn. They won’t bother you again.” The *I’ll make sure of it* part of that statement goes unspoken, but I hear it all the same.

“Thank you,” I blurt out. “For helping me, I mean. I appreciate it.”

“Helping you?” His brows go up and, if possible, his eyes go even darker in the dim light.

“Is that what you think I did?”

“Isn’t it?”

He shakes his head, gives a cold little laugh that has my heart stuttering in its chest. “You have no idea, do you?”

“No idea of what?”

He doesn’t say anything for long seconds, just stares at me until I can’t help but squirm a little. I’ve never had anyone look at me the way he is right now, like **he** can’t decide if he made a mistake rescuing me from imminent death.

Commented [WU71]: Your comment disappeared when I changed it, but I did change for you

Or maybe it’s just that he can’t decide what to say next. In which case, join the freaking club ...

In the end, though, all that brooding silence is for nothing, because he simply says, “You’re bleeding.”

“I am?” My hand goes to my cheek, which aches from where Marc’s shoulder banged into it when I was trying to get away from him.

“Not there.” He lifts his hand to my mouth and gently—so gently I can barely feel him—brushes his thumb **across my lower lip**. “Here.” He holds his thumb up and in the dim light I can just see the smear of blood glistening on his skin.

Commented [ep72]: Why is her lip bleeding?

Commented [WU73]: Added something in about this above

“Oh, gross!-~~sorry!~~” **I** reach to wipe the blood away. “Let me—”

He laughs, cutting me off. Then brings his thumb to his lips and—holding my gaze with his own—sticks his thumb in his mouth and slowly sucks off the blood.

It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen, and I don’t even know why.

Maybe it’s the way his eyes heat up the second he tastes my blood.

Maybe it's the little noise he makes as he swallows.

Or maybe it's the fact that that swipe of his thumb across my lips, followed by that lift of his thumb to his own lips, feels more intimate than any kiss I've ever shared with another boy.

"You should go." The words sound like they're being torn out of him.

"Now?"

"Yeah, now." His eyes are cold again, his voice mocking. "And unless you want a repeat of tonight's little adventure, I strongly suggest that after midnight, you stay in your room where you belong."

"Stay in my—" My blood runs cold at what he's implying. "Are you saying I'm responsible for what happened with Marc and Quinn?"

"Don't be stupid. Of course I'm not. They should both have better control."

It's a weird way of saying they shouldn't go around trying to murder girls, and I start to ask him about it. But he continues before I can figure out how to phrase it. "But you need to be careful, too. This isn't like your old high school."

"How do you know what my old high school was like?"

"I don't," he says with a smirk. "But I can guarantee it's nothing like **Katsmere Academy**."

Jaxon's right—of course he's right—but I'm not about to back down now. "You don't know that."

He leans forward then, until his face, and his lips, are barely an inch from mine. And just like earlier, I know it should make me uncomfortable. But it doesn't. It just makes me burn. And this time, when my knees tremble, it has nothing to do with fear.

Commented [ep74]: All I can think of when I read this is a cat dragging its butt across my carpet and smearing it's diarrhea. Lolol omg I'm broken. haha

Commented [WU75]: OH MY GOD. WHAT???? EEEEEEW. It's Kats-mere, if that helps

My lips part, my breath hitches in my chest, my heart beats faster. He feels it—I can see it in his blown out pupils, in the way he goes wary and watchful. Can hear it in the sudden harshness of his own breath, feel it in the slight tremble of his body against my own. For a second, just a second, I think he’s going to kiss me. But then he leans in further, past my mouth, until his lips are all but pressed up against my ear.

“You have no idea what I know.”

The warmth of his breath has me gasping, melting, my whole body sagging against his of its own volition.

He lets it happen for one second, two, his hands on my waist, his shoulders curving down and into me. And then, just as suddenly, he’s gone, stepping back so fast I nearly fall without the support of his body.

“You need to go,” he says, voice even lower, rougher, than before.

“Now?” I demand, incredulous.

“Right now.” He nods to the staircase and somehow I find myself moving toward it, though I never make a conscious decision to do so. “Go straight to your room and lock the door.”

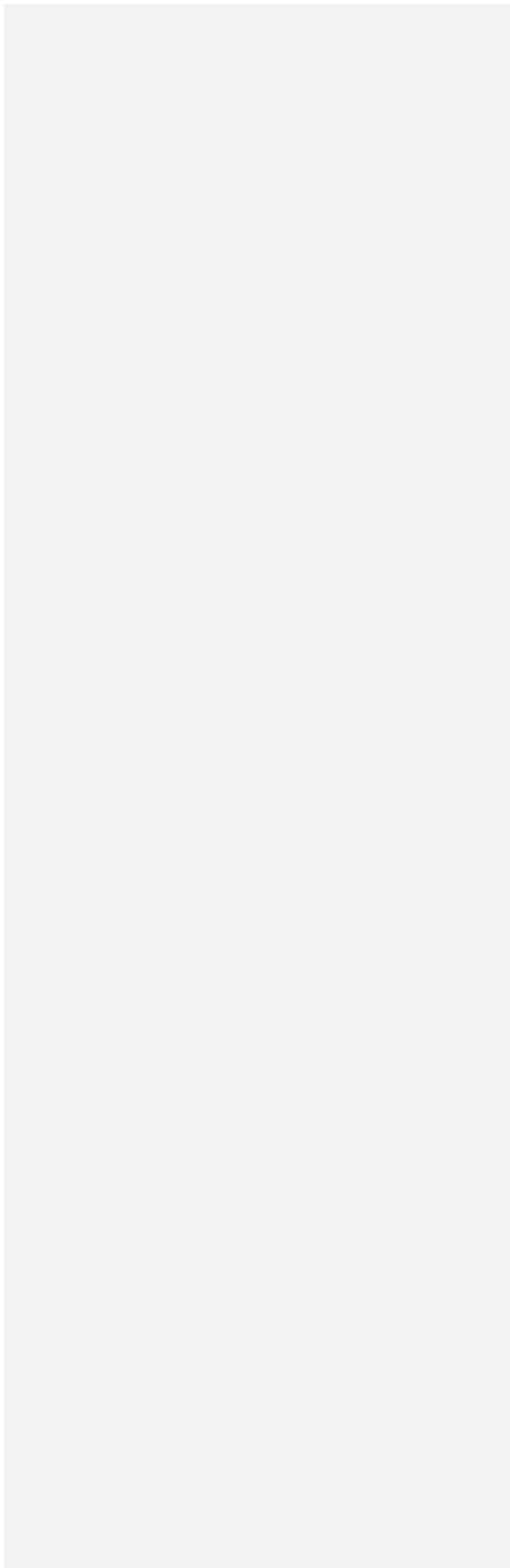
“I thought you said I don’t have to worry about Marc or Quinn anymore?” I ask over my shoulder

“You don’t.”

“Well then, why do I need to—” I break off when I realize that I’m talking to myself.

Because once again, Jaxon is gone. And I’m left wondering when I’ll see him again.

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Chapter Eight

Not going to lie. I'm a little shell-shocked when I finally make it back to my room. It's nearly five a.m. and the last thing I want to do is crawl back into bed and stare at the ceiling until Macy wakes up. But it's not like I feel safe wandering the school anymore either, considering I could be dead by now if Jaxon hadn't shown up when he did.

And since the last thing I can do—and the last thing I want to do—is count on him to save me if I end up in another crazy situation like that, I think my best bet is to hang in my room until Macy wakes up and I can get her opinion on what just happened. Although, if her opinion is anything other than OMG, WTF?!?!? I'm taking my unpacked suitcases and heading back to San Diego. Freeloading off Heather's family for the next eight months is better than dying. Or at least that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Especially since I don't get altitude sickness in La Jolla.

The nausea hits me as I'm tiptoeing across the room, and I barely make it to the bathroom before I'm heaving into the toilet. Since I haven't eaten since lunch yesterday, there's nothing but a little water to throw up. But that only makes it worse—I hate, hate, hate throwing up but I hate dry heaving even more. I might not have cried in the shower last night, but I'm definitely crying by the time my stomach stops revolting.

Turns out the only thing worse than trying to puke silently is trying to puke and cry at the same time without making a sound.

I must not be as successful at either as I hoped, -because Macy is sitting on the floor next to the bathroom door when I finally decide it's safe to try to make it to my bed. She takes one look at me and wraps her arms around me in a giant hug.

I let her, because after everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours, I need the hug.

"You okay?" she asks when I finally pull away. "I promise the altitude sickness won't last forever."

"It's not just the altitude sickness. It's everything."

"I bet." She waits while I brush my teeth, then walks me over to my bed. "Climb in. I'll get you some water and Advil and you can tell me about `everything.'"

"It's just-...Alaska's like a foreign planet, you know? Like everything about this place is so different than home and it's hard to get used to it, you know?" Normally I don't dump my stuff on people I don't know really well—it's easier to just keep everything inside—but Macy is the closest friend I have here. And there's a part of me that feels like I'll explode if I don't talk to someone.

"I totally get that. I've lived here my whole life and some days it feels bizarre to me, too. But you've only been in the state about twelve hours, and you've been feeling gross for most of those. Why don't you give it a few days, wait til the altitude sickness wears off and you've gone to a couple days of classes? Maybe things won't seem as strange once you get into a routine."

"I know you're right. And I wasn't even feeling that terrible about things when I woke up, until—²⁹⁶ I break off, trying to think of the best way to tell her about what just happened.

"Until???"

"I know it's a big school, but do you know two guys named Marc and Quinn?" I ask.

“That depends. Does one of them have a septum piercing?”

“Yes. It’s a big, black ring.” I hold my fingers to my nose to demonstrate.

“Then yeah, I know them. They’re juniors, like me. And good guys, really funny. In fact, there was this one time—” “ I must not have a poker face, because she stops abruptly. Narrows her eyes. “Then again, I’m beginning to think the question I should be asking is how do *you* know them?”

“Maybe they were just fooling around, but—...I’m pretty sure they tried to kill me tonight. Or at least scare me to death.”

“They tried to *what*?” she squawks, nearly dropping the bottle of water she got out of the fridge for me. “Tell me what happened right now. And don’t leave *anything* out.”

She seems adamant, so I ~~do what she tell me~~, faithfully recite the events until I get to the point where Jaxon saved me. I’m not sure how I feel about that—or how I feel about him—and I’m not quite ready to talk about it yet. And I’m certainly not ready to listen to Macy talk about it.

“So what happened?” she asks, when I break off abruptly. “How did you get away from them?”

“Someone heard the fight and came to investigate. Once the boysy realized there was a witness, they chilled out pretty quick.”

“I bet they did, the jerks. The last thing they’d want is to be reported to my dad. But they should have thought of that before they put their hands on you. I swear, I’m going to murder them myself.” She looks, and sounds, mad enough to do just that even before she continues, “Do you really think they would have locked you outside?”

“I mean, I know it sounds crazy, but ~~t~~hey seemed pretty determined. Like, if someone else hadn’t come along, I’m sure they would have shoved me out the door.”

“What were they thinking? I mean, it makes no sense. They don’t even know you, so why do this?” She gets up, starts pacing. “You totally could have gotten frostbite or hypothermia if they’d left you outside for very long, let alone what could have happened if they’d kept you out there more than five minutes. You totally could have died. Which makes no sense. They’re always a little nuts, super high energy. But I’ve never seen them be malicious before. It doesn’t make sense.”

“The whole thing doesn’t make sense. I’m beginning to think they were high or something, because there’s no other explanation as to why they would have been outside in only jeans and T-shirts. I mean, how did *they* avoid getting hypothermia?”

“I don’t know,” Macy says. But she looks uncomfortable, like maybe she knows for a fact that they do drugs. Or like she thinks I’m crazy for even suggesting that they were outside without any protective clothing on. But I know what I saw. Those two guys were definitely not wearing any kind of cold weather gear.

“Maybe they were only outside for a minute or two,” she says eventually, handing me two more Advil. “Whatever’s going on with them, I’m sure my father will figure it out,”

There’s a part of me that wants to ask her not to tell Uncle Finn because it’s hard enough being the new girl without also being a snitch. But every time I think about what might have happened—what *would* have happened if Jaxon hadn’t come along—I know Uncle Finn has to be told. Otherwise, what’s to stop them from doing it again to somebody else?

“In the meantime, you need to get some more sleep. Unless you’re hungry?”

Since just the thought of food has my stomach spinning in protest, I tell her, “Think I’m going to pass on that. But I’m not sure I can sleep either. Maybe I should unpack my suitcases, get stuff ready for tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry about your suitcases. I already did them.”

“You did? When?”

“After you fell asleep last night. I figured if you didn’t like where I put stuff, you could change it. But at least this way, all your stuff is within easy reach.”

“You didn’t have to do that, Macy.”

“I know I didn’t have to do it. But ~~since~~ you’re not feeling great, so I figured a little -help couldn’t hurt. Besides, we have a party to go to this afternoon and you need to be able to find your makeup and hair stuff.”

I’m not sure what amuses me more, the way Macy just casually drops in the fact that she expects me to attend a party with her today or the fact that she actually expects me to wear makeup to it, when eyeliner, mascara and -a little lipgloss are normally as close as I get to a fully done face.

I can only imagine her shock, considering she had a full face of makeup on yesterday when she was riding a snowmobile through the Alaskan wilderness. I can only imagine what her party look will be.

“So what kind of party is this exactly?” I ask as I curl up under the hot pink comforter that is rapidly growing on me-- maybe because it’s the softest, most comfortable one I’ve ever owned.

“It’s a welcome to ~~SCHOOL NAME~~Katsmere Academy party, for you.”

Commented [ep76]: Other than eye shadow, what other make up is there really? Almost no teen wears blush these days.

Commented [WU77]: Foundation, lip liner, highlighter, contour, concealer, powder, bronzer, glitter ... lol

“What?” I sit up so fast that my head starts to throb all over again. “A welcome party? For me? Are you *serious*?”

“Well, to be fair, the school hosts a kind of high tea one afternoon a month to promote student unity. We just decided to make today’s tea a little more festive, in your honor.”

“Oh, yes. Because the students have all been so welcoming so far.” I bury my face in my pillow and groan.

“Okay, fair point. But you can’t judge everyone by the shi—” “She breaks off on a cough. “Marc and Quinn were total shits, no doubt about it. But everyone else is going to be so excited to meet you. I swear.”

I think of the glare on Jaxon’s face as he told me to lock my door, of the strange looks I got in the hallway earlier from so many of the students we passed. “Yeah, well, I’m not so sure I’m excited to meet them.”

“Who could blame you after what happened? But look at Flint. He’s great, right?”

“He really was.” I can’t help smiling as I think of the way he teased me, called me New Girl.

“Most of the people you meet here are going to be like him, not like Marc and Quinn. I promise.” She sighs. “But I can cancel, if you want. Tell everybody that your altitude sickness is too bad. Which, at the rate you’re going might not even be a lie.”

She’s trying so hard not to sound disappointed, but I can hear it, even with a pillow over my face. “No, don’t cancel,” I tell her. “As long as I’m not puking, I’ll go.”

“Really? Are you sure?”

No, I’m really- *not* sure. But I’ve got to face these prep school kids en masse sooner or later. Might as well get it over with today when they’re all under adult supervision and

presumably on their best behavior. So much less chance of me being tossed into the snow or out a window that way ...

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Awesome!” She plops down on the bed beside me, holds out the water bottle she’d given me earlier—and that I’ve studiously avoided, except for the sips I needed to take the painkillers. I figure the less I have in my stomach, the less likely I am to puke. And I’m all for not throwing up ...

But Macy is having none of it. “Drink up,” she says, giving me the stink eye.

“I don’t want to,” I whine.

“Yeah, well, do it anyway. If you don’t, I guarantee you’ll be throwing up again within an hour. Altitude sickness requires lots and lots of hydration. I mean, if you don’t want to get pulmonary or brain edema which, you know, could kill you almost as fast as hypothermia.”

“Seriously?” I roll my eyes at her, but I take the stupid bottle of water and drink half of it in one go. “There. Satisfied?”

“I will be when you finish it.” She smiles angelically.

I stick my tongue out in response. “Has anyone ever told you you’re a lot tougher than you look?”

“My boyfriend. But I think he secretly likes it.”

“Good for him. But you can trust me when I say, I *don’t* secretly like it.” Still, I stick my tongue out at her to let her know I’m just teasing.

She just rolls her eyes back as she says, “You will when you stop puking and the room stops spinning.” She pulls the TV controller out of the pocket of her Spongebob pajama bottoms

Commented [ep78]: Can she roll her eyes playfully or wink at her or something to soften this statement a little. She’s being firm but also teasing and poor Macy is just trying to help.

and turns the television on. “Promise to finish the rest of that bottle of water and I’ll let you choose what we watch.”

“That’s a crappy bribe.”

“Yeah, well, it’s better than no bribe at all.”

“Fair point.” I take another long swallow of water. “Do you have Netflix?”

“Are you kidding?” She gives me a look. “I live on a mountain in the middle of Alaska. I’d die without Netflix.”

“Point taken. How about Legacies? My bff Heather and I just started watching it last week.”

Macy’s eyes go huge. “Legacies?”

“Yeah. It’s this really cool show about a bunch of kid and teenage vampires, witches and werewolves all living together at a boarding school. I mean, it’s a little farfetched if you ask me, but it’s fun to watch. And most of the main guy characters are totally hot.”

“I bet.” My cousin wiggles her eyebrows. “Count me in, then. I mean, who can resist a hot vampire?”

“My sentiments exactly.”

We start the show back at the first episode so Macy can catch up. And as we watch the main character’s foster brother become a werewolf, I can’t help thinking about what Marc and Quinn said about hunting tonight because of the full moon. I mean, I know it’s just that they needed the brightness of the moon to illuminate the dark wilderness round here. *Of course* I know that.

Still, not going to lie. After a night like I just had, it’s hard not to wonder exactly what I’ve gotten myself into here ...

Commented [WU79]: Too tongue in cheek? I couldn’t resist, but I can change it to Supernatural or something like that.

Commented [ep80]: Totally up to you. ☺

Commented [ep81]: This should go with the previous dialogue. Here it seems like it’s still Macy talking.

Commented [WU82]: It is Macy talking

Commented [ep83]: Need an end of scene hook. Casually wondering if Jaxon would be at her welcome party tomorrow and if he was, would he even acknowledge her?

Chapter Nine

Stop fidgeting!” Macy tells me several hours later, smacking at my hands as we get ready to head to the party. “You look amazing.”

“I look ridiculous.”

“Why? Because you’re in a dress?”

“Because I’m in *your* dress!”

“Hey.” She holds her hands up in an I’m innocent kind of gesture. “Is it my fault you don’t own even *one*? I mean, seriously. What seventeen year old girl doesn’t have a *dress*?” She sounds like she doesn’t know whether to be bewildered or scandalized.

“One who is moving to Alaska!” I defend myself. “I got rid of them because it’s too cold outside here to wear a dress!”

“Maybe, but we aren’t going outside now, are we? Besides, it isn’t this cold here forever. In the summer it makes it to the sixties.”

“You say that like I’m supposed to be impressed.”

She rolls her eyes. “The sixties aren’t bad.”

“Maybe not, but they aren’t exactly beach weather either.” I take another look in the mirror, then can’t resist tugging at the neckline a little. It’s a beautiful dress, and probably looks amazing on Macy with her tall, willowy figure. But my big boobs make things a little trickier and I’m afraid I’ll fall out of this thing if I take too deep of a breath—which is so *not* the first impression I’m going for here.

Macy obviously doesn’t share my concern, because she shoots me an exasperated look even as she swats at my hand for the third time in as many minutes. “Stop! You really do look beautiful.”

Beautiful is a bit more than a stretch—with my curly auburn hair, plain brown eyes, and the random groupings of freckles on my nose and cheeks I’m pretty much the opposite of gorgeous. On a good day, I’m cute. Standing next to Macy, who is freaking gorgeous, I’m wallpaper. The bland, boring kind.

“Come on,” she continues, grabbing my forearm and tugging me toward the door. “If we wait much longer, we’re going to be more than fashionably late to your welcome party.”

“We could just skip it all together,” I say even as I let her pull me out the door. “Be unfashionably **absent**.”

“Too late,” she answers with a deliberately obnoxious grin. “Everyone’s waiting for us.”

Commented [SA84]: LOL!

“Oh yay.” Despite the sarcasm, I head -out. The sooner we get there, the sooner I’ll get the hard part over with.

But as I start to weave my way through the crystal beads outside our door, Macy says, “Here, let me hold those for you. Don’t want them to shock you. Sorry I didn’t think about that yesterday.”

“*Shock* me? What do you mean?”

“They shock everybody.” She tilts her head to the side, gives me a funny look. “Didn’t you feel it when you went downstairs last night?”

“Umm, no.” I reach out and close my fist around several stands of beads, trying to figure out what she’s talking about.

“You really don’t feel anything?” Macy asks after a second.

“I really don’t.” I look down at my purple galaxy Chucks. “Maybe it’s the shoes.”

“Maybe.” She looks doubtful. “Come on, let’s go.”

She closes the door, then brushes her hands through the beads several times, like she’s *trying* to get shocked. Which, I know, makes absolutely no sense, but that’s definitely what it looks like.

“So,” I ask as we finally head down the hall. “Why would you deliberately keep a beaded curtain around that builds up static electricity and shocks everyone who comes into contact with it?”

“Not everyone,” she answers with a pointed look. “And because it’s pretty. Obviously.”

“Obviously.” I roll my eyes behind her back, making sure she can’t see me.

She must feel it, though, because she reaches back and grabs onto my wrist so she can start dragging me down the hall at a pace speedwalkers everywhere would envy. I try to hold her

back a little, but she's surprisingly strong for someone so delicate looking so in the end, I just kind of give up and let her drag me.

Plus, not thinking about where we're going leaves me free to just kind of take things in. I was so tired and nervous yesterday that I didn't spend much time checking out my surroundings. But as we make our way down the hall, I can't help but notice the crown moulding on the walls. Black shot through with thorny gold flowers, it's elaborate and beautiful and just a little creepy. Not as creepy as the lights that line the ceiling, however, which look a lot like trios of weeping black flowers connected by crooked, thorny stems. Gold lightbulbs hang from the center of the flowers, partially obscured by their downturned petals.

The whole effect is eerie but beautiful and, while I definitely wouldn't choose to decorate my room like this, I have to admit the overall effect is stunning.

So stunning that I almost don't notice that by the time we make it to the second floor, Macy's grip has loosened and my stomach has calmed down. More like the pterodactyls have become butterflies, but I'm not going to complain considering it's a definite step up. I've still got a low-grade headache from the altitude, but for now the Advil has everything under control.

I just hope it stays that way.

I know Macy says this is supposed to be a welcome party, but I'm kind of hoping the tea just goes on as usual. On the plane, I decided my goal this year is going to be to just kind of blend in to the student body, to be as invisible as possible until I stop reeling from my parents' death and this insane move to Alaska.

As we approach the door, this time I'm the one who grabs on to Macy's wrist. "You aren't going to make me stand up in front of everyone are you? -We're just going to kind of mingle and walk around, right?"

“Totally. I mean, I think Dad is planning on giving a little welcome speech, but it won’t be any big deal.”

Of course he is. I mean, why wouldn’t he? After all, who doesn’t think painting a target on the new girl’s back is a good idea? FML.

“Hey, don’t look so worried.” Macy stops in front of an ornately carved set of double doors and throws her arms around me. “Everything is going to be okay. I swear.”

“I’m willing to settle for not catastrophic,” I tell her, but even as I say it, I’m not holding my breath. Not when it feels like there’s a weight pressing down on me. Making me smaller. Turning me into nothing.

It’s not the school’s fault—I’ve felt like this for the last month. Still, being here in this place—in Alaska—somehow makes it all worse. At least at home in San Diego, I could pretend things were going to be okay. Here, every second that passes only makes me more aware of the fact that I’m never going to see my parents again.

“You’ll *settle* for amazing,” she corrects me as she grabs my arm and wraps hers through it. Then she’s leaning forward, sending the double doors flying in both directions as she walks in like she owns the place.

And maybe she does. From the way everyone in the room turns to look at her, I can believe it. At least until I realize my worst nightmares have come true and they’re all looking at me. And none of them look impressed.

I don’t know where to look, so I look everywhere, taking in the crimson and black velvet baroque wallpaper, the three-tiered iron chandeliers with black crystals dripping from each elaborately carved arm, the fancy red chairs and black cloth covered tables that take up the back half of the large room.

Every five feet or so there are black wall sconces with what look like actual lit candles in them. I step closer to check them out and find myself completely charmed by the fact that each wall sconce is carved into the shape of a different dragon. One with his wings spread wide in front of a fancy Celtic cross, another curled up around the top of a castle, a third obviously in mid-flight. In all the dragons, the candle flame is lined up to flicker in their wide-open mouths and as I get even closer I figure out that yes, the flame is real.

I can't imagine how my uncle gets away with that—no fire marshall in the country would be okay with letting a school have unattended candles around students. Then again, this is the middle of nowhere Alaska and I can't imagine a fire marshall actually paying ~~SCHOOL~~ NAMEKatsmere an unscheduled visit.

Macy tugs at my arm and reluctantly I let her pull me away from the dragons further into the room. That's when I glance up and realize the ceiling is also painted red, with more of that black moulding lining the top edges of the walls while large buffet tables run the length of the front wall, loaded down with fruit, pastries, sandwiches, and drinks.

No one is at the buffet table, though, and almost no one is seated at the tables, either. Instead, students are grouped together in various areas of the room and this chosen isolation might be the only thing here that feels familiar. Guess it doesn't matter if you go to a regular high school in San Diego or a high end boarding school in Alaska—cliques are everywhere. And apparently-- if you are in a high end boarding school—those cliques are about a thousand times snobbier looking and more unapproachable than normal cliques.

Lucky, lucky me.

As Macy and I step further into the room, I find myself eyeing the different factions.

Commented [WU85]: Added the line here about snobbier, etc.

Energy—and disdain—rolls off the students near the window as they look me over.

There's about thirty-five of them and they're all huddled into one large group, like a team going over their plays right before they take the field. The guys are all wearing jeans and the girls are all dressed in tiny little dresses, both of which show off bodies that are as close to perfect as I have ever seen.

Curiosity—and a healthy dose of contempt—covers my new classmates at the back of the room. Dressed mostly in long, flowing dresses or button-up shirts in luxurious patterns and fabrics that fit the room perfectly, they're beautiful and delicate looking and even before Macy waves excitedly at them, I know that this is her group.

She starts moving toward them and I follow, disguising my sudden nervousness with a smile I'm far from feeling.

As we head toward Macy's friends, we pass another large clump of students and I swear I can feel heat radiating from them in waves. Every single person in this group is tall—even the girls are close to six feet—and the fact that they're watching me with varying degrees of scorn and suspicion makes walking past them distinctly uncomfortable. Basketball, anyone?

At least until I see Flint in the center of the group, grinning and wiggling his eyebrows at me so wildly that I can't help but giggle. Like everyone else in his group, he's dressed in jeans and a tight T-shirt that shows off his chest and biceps. He looks good. Really good. Then again, so do most of his friends. He sticks his tongue out at me right before I turn away and -this time I full on laugh.

"What's funny?" Macy demands, but then she sees Flint and just rolls her eyes. "You know how long I spent trying to get his attention—and being totally ignored—before I gave up? If we weren't cousins who are also destined to be best friends, I would resent you."

“Pretty sure Flint and I are destined to be friends, too,” I tell her as I hustle to keep up with her ridiculously long stride. “I don’t think guys cross their eyes like that at girls they’re interested in.”

“Yeah, well, you never know. -Dra—” “ she breaks off on a violent cough, like she’s just choked on her own saliva or something.

“You okay?” I pat her back a little.

“I’m fine.” She coughs again, looks a little nervous as she tugs at one of her flowy sleeves. “Drastic.”

“Drastic?” I repeat, more than a little puzzled at this point.

“In case you were wondering.” She shoots me an assessing look. “Before. -I was going to say drastic. Like sometimes guys go to drastic measures to get girls they like to notice them. That’s what I was going to say. -*Drastic.*”

“Ooooookay.” I don’t say anything else because now I’m just confused. Not so much by what she’s saying as by how emphatic she’s being. - Then again, she got weird around Flint yesterday, too. Maybe it’s being this close to him that makes her all tongue-tied.

Macy doesn’t say anything else as we finally make it to the center of the huge, ornately decorated room. Not that I blame her because the group we’re passing now is filled with the most intimidating people in the place—by far. -And that’s saying something considering nearly everyone in this room is unnerving af.

But these people take it to a whole new level. - Dressed entirely in monochromatic shades of black or white— designer shirts, dresses, trousers, shoes, *jewelry*—they all but drip money-... along with a careless kind of power that it’s impossible to miss. Though they are as obvious a clique as any of the others in the room, there’s a kind of formality between them that the other

groups lack, a sense that they have each other's back against the others in the room, but that the alliance ends there.

As we walk by them, I realize there is one other difference between the other groups and them. Not one of them has so much as glanced my way.

I can't help being grateful for that fact, considering my knees wobble a little more with each step I take toward Macy's friends. I'm completely overwhelmed—not just by the number of people at the party who are looking at me, but by how insanely tight most of the groups are. Like seriously, there's no crossover—no guy dressed all in black hanging with a girl in a long flowy dress. No super tall girl making eyes at one of the sporty looking guys, or girls, near the window.

No, everyone here at Katsmere Academy seems to be staying firmly in their own lanes. And judging by the looks on their faces, it's not fear keeping them there. It's disdain for everyone else in the room.

Fun times. Seriously. I mean, I've always known prep schools are exclusive and snobby—who doesn't? But I wasn't expecting it to this degree. I mean, how much money, status and attitude can one group of people have?

Guess it's a good thing I'm related to the headmaster or I'd never make the cut. Nepotism for the win...or loss, depending on how this little soiree goes.

I can't imagine *why* I was nervous to come to this thing...

Only pride keeps me from fleeing as Macy finally loosens her insane grip. -Well, that and the fact that acting -like prey right now seems like a particularly bad idea. I mean, if I don't want to spend the rest of my senior year dodging every mean girl in the place.

“I can’t wait for you to meet my friends,” Macy tells me as we finally reach the group in the back. Up close they’re even more spectacular, different gemstones gleaming in their hair and against their skin. Earrings, pendants, hairclips, plus eyebrow, lip and nose rings, all bedecked with colorful stones.

Commented [ep86]: Love this

I’ve never felt more plain in my life, and it takes every ounce of self-control I have—not to mention the fear that Macy will smack me again in front of all these people—not to tug on the neckline of my borrowed dress.

“Hey guys! This is my cousin, Gr—”

“Grace!” the beautiful, redhead with the giant amethyst pendant interrupts. “Welcome to Katsmere Academy! We’ve heard soooo much about you.” Her voice is enthusiastic to the point of being mocking, but I’m not sure who she’s making fun of—Macy or me. At least until I look into her eyes, which are cold and dark and flat—and focused entirely on me.

Big surprise.

I’m not sure how I’m supposed to answer her—being polite is one thing. Participating while she makes fun of me is something else. Thankfully, before I can decide what to do, the blond girl does it for me.

“Knock it off, Vesta,” she tells her before turning to me with what appears (I hope) to be a genuine smile. “Hi, Grace. I’m Lily.” Her gray eyes seem friendly and her loose curls bounce as she nods to the last girl in the group, whose black hair is worn in dreads woven through with sparkling ribbons. “And that’s Gwen. It really is nice to meet you.”

“Umm, it’s nice to meet you, too.” I’m trying, I really am. But my tone must sound as doubtful as the rest of me feels, because her eyes cloud over.

“Don’t pay any attention to Vesta,” she says, all but hissing the redhead’s name. “She’s just bitter because all the guys are looking at you. She doesn’t like the competition.”

“Oh, I’m not—” “ I break off as Vesta snorts.

“Yeah, that’s totally why I’m bitter. I’m worried about the competition. It has nothing to do with the fact that Dr. MacArran brought a—” “

“Why don’t we get something to drink?” Macy interrupts her loudly.

I start to tell her I’m not thirsty—the low-grade nausea is back—but she doesn’t wait for my answer before she starts dragging me across the room to the buffet tables. At one end there are two huge teapots and an arrangement of teacups along with two open coolers filled with icy water bottles and cans of soda.

I start to reach for a cup—I’ve been freezing since I first landed in this state. But then I notice several orange and white 5 gallon sports thermoses set up on a separate table. “What are those?” I ask, because I’m curious. And because there seem to be an awful lot of drinks for the number of people in this room. I really, really hope this doesn’t mean that a bunch more students are going to be showing up. We’re already over my comfort level with the number who are already here

“Oh, those are just water,” Macy says breezily. “We always keep a bunch on hand in case the temperature drops suddenly and the pipes freeze. Better safe than sorry.”

It seems to me that they’d have special pipes and special insulation for places in Alaska to make sure that doesn’t happen. But what do I know? I mean, it’s only November and it’s already below freezing outside. And that’s *normal*. It makes sense that a particularly harsh winter could really mess things up up here.

Before I can ask anything else, Macy bends down and pulls a Dr. Pepper out of the cooler and holds it out to me. “I made sure Dad told them to order Dr. Pepper for the party—and the cafeteria. It’s still your favorite, right?”

It *is* my favorite. I thought I was in the mood for tea, but there’s something about that maroon can that gets to me. That reminds me of home and my parents and the life I used to have. Homesickness wells up inside of me and I take the can, desperate for something—anything—familiar.

Something—anything—that will make the transition easier.

Macy smiles at me, nods encouragingly, as I take the can and I realize that she knows what I’m feeling. She may not truly understand what’s going on inside of me, but she’s trying to make things as easy—as comfortable—for me as possible. Gratitude follows the homesickness and I smile back. “Thanks. That’s really cool of you.”

“It’s nothing.” She knocks her shoulder against mine “My dad and I really want you to be happy here, Grace.”

“I will be.” I clear my throat when I realize how that sounds. “I mean, I already am.”

“No, you aren’t. And I don’t blame you—everything is a mess for you right now. But it will get better, I promise.”

She’s in no position to make that promise—her mom *left*, she didn’t die—~~but~~ but I don’t call her on it. Instead, I just nod and open the Dr. Pepper and take a sip.

“Who do you want to meet next?” she asks, nodding to two guys lounging in red velvet armchairs near the back of the room. They’re dressed in the richly patterned button-ups that mark them as members of Macy’s group. “That’s Cam and his best friend.”

Commented [ep87]: What faction are they with?

“Cam?” I repeat, so it sounds like I’m paying attention. The truth is I’m too focused on the fancy -chairs to pay attention to the guys who are sitting in them.

What kind of school has -velvet chairs anyway? Not to mention a-gold wall sconces and ornate fabric wallpaper that seems more at home in a fancy mansion than here in a boarding school for teenagers?

Then again, we *are* in a freaking castle...one that comes complete with its own gargoyles. I guess that’s as close to a fancy mansion as you can get out here in the Alaskan tundra.

Commented [ep88]: :)

“My boyfriend. He’s been dying to meet you. Come on.”

Pretty hard to say no to that, so I don’t even try, though I know Cam—and the rest of them that are “dying to meet” the new girl-- are destined to be disappointed. I’m just not that interesting.

“Cam! This is the cousin I was telling you about!” Macy squeals before we even get next to her boyfriend.

“I know, baby.” He stands and holds out a hand. “Grace, right?”

“Yes.” I shake his hand, and as I do, I can’t help noticing how pale his skin is. Like Macy is pale, but Cam takes pasty to another whole level. One more thing I have to look forward to, courtesy of Alaska. Fantastic. “It’s good to meet you.”

“Good to meet you, too. My girl’s been talking about you coming for weeks now.” He grins at me. “Hope you like snow, surfer girl.”

I don’t bother to tell him that I’m not much of a surfer. God knows I’m guilty of stereotyping too—before I got here, I was half-certain I’d be living in an igloo, like in those old cartoons.

“I don’t know if I do or not,” I tell him. “Yesterday was the first time I’d ever seen it.”

That gets his attention—and his friend’s, too. “You’ve *never* seen snow?” the other guy asks incredulously. “Ever?”

“Nope.”

“She’s from San Diego, James.” Macy looks, and sounds, exasperated. “Is that really so hard to believe?”

“I guess not.” He shrugs and sends me a grin that I can tell is meant to be charming but actually creeps me out a little. I’ve always hated guys who look at girls like they’re food meant to be gobbled up. “Hi, Grace.”

He doesn’t extend his hand, and I definitely don’t extend mine. “Hi.”

“So, what do you think of Alaska so far?” Cam asks as he loops an arm around Macy’s waist. He doesn’t wait for an answer before he sits back down, pulling my cousin into his lap as he does.

Before I can answer, he’s got his face buried in Macy’s neck and she’s giggling, her hands threading their way through his sleek brown hair as she burrows into him.

Which is pretty much my clue to leave as things suddenly get really awkward. Especially since James continues to stare at me like he’s waiting to see if I’m going to plop myself down in his lap—which, for the record, I most definitely am not.

“I, uh, need another drink,” I tell him, awkwardly holding up my still mostly full can of Dr. Pepper.

“I can get it for you,” he offers, starting forward, but I take a big step back.

“You don’t have to—” “

“You okay, Grace?” Macy breaks off her giggling long enough to ask, completely serious.

“Yeah, of course. I’m fine. I’m just—” “Once again, I hold up my Dr. Pepper. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Cam must do something super sexy to her, because Macy’s laugh changes, gets lower, about the same time I lose all of her attention.

I don’t wait for James to offer again—or worse, insist. Instead, I take off across the room like a shot. But I barely make it to the drinks before two very -large, very warm hands land on my shoulders.

Chapter Ten

I freeze, my heart running wild as *NotJamesNotJamesNotJames* runs through my head like a mantra gone wild. I mean, seriously. —Don't I have enough on my plate right now? Do I really need some **jerk** trying to make me his afternoon snack as well?

Commented [ep89]: To not confuse him with Jaxon, also a douchebag of the week. ;)

But before I can figure out what to say, the guy leans forward and—in a low, rich voice—asks, “Want a piggy back ride?”

And just like that the tension dissolves, leaving nothing but a cautious joy in its place. “Flint!” I whirl around to find him grinning at me, green eyes dancing wickedly.

“Hey there, New Girl,” he drawls. “Having fun?”

“Absolutely.” I hold up my Dr. Pepper. “Doesn't it look like I'm having a good time?”

“It looks like someone can't take a hint, so I thought I'd lend a hand.” —As one we turn to watch James—who, as it turns out, did follow me to the drink table--sulkily makes his way back to Cam and Macy, who are still wrapped up in each other.

“Thanks for **that**. I appreciate it.”

Commented [ep90]: Trying to pick up the pacing with that deletion. A bit slow in this chapter.

“Gratitude is so last year.” He says it in a fake, high-pitched voice that sounds remarkably like every mean girl everywhere.

The voice, along with the ridiculous hand gesture he uses to accompany it, has me laughing so hard I nearly snort. And that's when I realize that half the room is still staring at me—while the other half is very deliberately *not* staring at me. Their disregard would be a relief *if* I didn't know they were doing it to make sure I understand how insignificant I really am to them.

Which, duh.

“So, do you want to grab something to eat?” Flint asks, nodding behind us.

Before I can answer, both of the room's heavy, wooden doors fly open. They slam against the wall with a bang that makes everyone in the room jump. And then turn to look.

On the plus side, that means no one is paying attention to me anymore. They're all looking at him. At *Jaxon*. And really, who could blame them when he walks in like he owns the place—and everybody in it.

Dressed all in designer black—silk V-neck sweater, wool pinstripe pants, shiny leather dress shoes—he's the sexiest thing I've ever seen. Also the most dangerous looking, with his scarred eyebrow furrowed and his dark gaze as cold as the snow-covered ground outside.

Commented [SA91]: See the letter for our thoughts on Jaxon's appearance.

On the negative side, all that coldness—all that darkness—is focused directly on me. And Flint, whose arm has somehow found its way back around my shoulders.

I try to glance away, but it's impossible. Try not to look him in the eyes. But Jaxon is just as captivating—just as mesmerizing—today as he was last night. And that's before he starts to move, all languid grace, all rolling shoulders and leading hips and legs that go on for freaking ever.

It's overwhelming.

He's overwhelming.

He's just a boy, I remind myself even as my mouth turns desert dry. Just a regular guy like everyone else here. But even as I tell myself that, I know it's a lie. Jaxon is anything but regular. Anything but ordinary, even here, among the blatantly extraordinary.

Next to me, Flint chuckles a little and I want to ask him what's so funny when [I notice](#) Jaxon is heading straight toward us, what looks very much like murder in his eyes. -But I can't get the words out, can't get anything out of a throat that has closed up tight.

I take a deep breath, hoping it will chill me out a little. It doesn't work, but then I never really thought it would.

Not when all I can see is how he looked last night, sucking my blood off his thumb.

Not when all I can hear is his voice—low, wicked, wild—warning me to lock my door.

Not when all I can think about is kissing that mouth, running my tongue along the perfect cupid's bow of his upper lip, dragging his lower lip between my teeth and biting down just a little bit.

I don't know where the thoughts are coming from—this isn't like me. I've never thought about a guy like this before, not even my old boyfriend from back home-. Even before we went out, I never- stood around imagining what it would be like to kiss -him

To wrap my arms around him.

To press my body tightly against his.

Because I can almost feel him—almost taste him—I make myself think of anything else. Snow. Of tomorrow's classes. Of my uncle who was supposed to be here but who is currently MIA.

None of it works, because all I can see is him.

My skin heats up under his gaze, my cheeks burning with embarrassment at the thoughts flitting through my head. And at the way he's looking at me, like he can read every single one of them.

It's impossible, I know it is. But the idea terrifies me enough that I jerk my eyes from his and lift my Dr. Pepper to my mouth, trying hard to look unconcerned. All of which leads to me choking on it for the second time in the last five minutes.

My abused -lungs revolt as- I cover my mouth and cough hard, eyes watering and humiliation burning in my belly. I pretend he isn't watching, pretend Flint isn't pounding on my back again, pretend that I don't even notice -the weight of all those cold stares as my new classmates watch me trying to suck air into lungs that just won't cooperate.

I need to get away from Flint's overzealous help, from Jaxon's -threatening, all-encompassing gaze. -At least if I find the nearest restroom, I can die in peace.

I start to move—I think I saw a bathroom marked in the hallway a couple doors down—but I've only taken a few steps when Jaxon's suddenly right next to me. He doesn't acknowledge me, doesn't even look at me as he passes, but just like at the top of the stairs yesterday, our shoulders brush as he walks by.

My choking fit disappears as quickly as it started. Fresh air floods my lungs.

If I didn't know it was impossible, I would think he had something to do with it. Not just the choking, but the stopping of it, as well.

But he didn't. Of course, he didn't. The whole idea is absurd.

Knowing that doesn't keep me from turning around and watching him walk away even though it's the worst thing I can do—for my sanity and -my reputation—~~—~~if the snark and giggles behind me are any indication.

He doesn't look back. In fact, he doesn't look at anyone as he walks along the edges of the buffet table, surveying its bounty. Doesn't so much as glance up as he eventually swipes one large, perfect strawberry from a bowl.

I expect him to pop it in his mouth then and there, but he doesn't.

Instead he walks to the center of the room—and the huge red velvet wingback chair positioned under the chandelier like a throne, with several other chairs in a half circle in front of it. Once there, he settles himself across it. Back against one arm, legs draped carelessly across the other as he says something to the five guys—all dark, all gorgeous, all stunning—sitting in the other chairs.

It's the first time I realize there's anyone in those chairs.

By now, nearly everyone in the room is watching him, trying to catch his eye. But he ignores them all, deliberately studying the strawberry he is pinching between his thumb and index finger for long seconds.

Eventually he lifts his gaze, but instead of making eye contact with any of the masses dying for his attention, he looks straight at me. Brows raised, eyes cold, lips twisted in a mockery of a smile that sends ice and heat sliding through my veins in equal measure. And that's before he raises the strawberry to his lips and bites it cleanly in half.

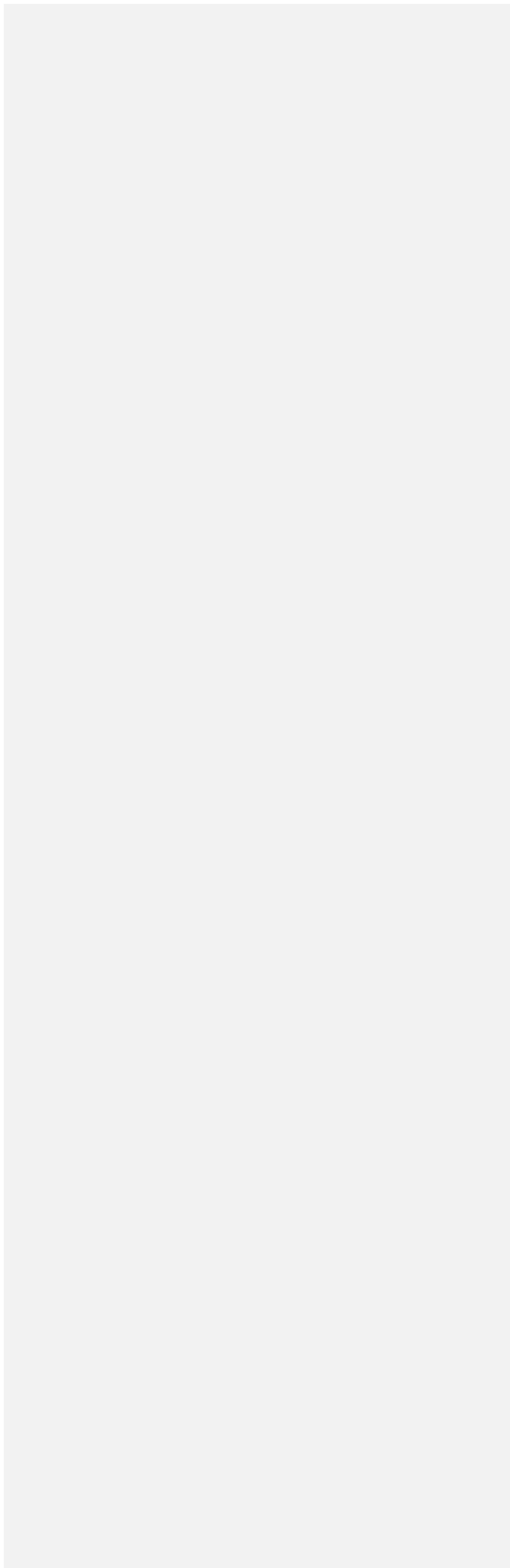
It's a warning if I've ever seen one—and a violent one at that—as a drop of red juice hangs for just a second on his bottom lip.

I know I should stay, know I should face him down. But as his tongue darts out and licks up the strawberry juice in a very obvious screw you to me and Flint and everyone else in the room, I do the only thing I can.

I turn to Flint and blurt out, "I'm sorry. I have to go."

And then I head for the door in as close to a run as I can manage without looking even stupider, desperate to get away before I shatter beneath the weight of Jaxon's obvious contempt.

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Chapter Eleven

Once I get outside the room, I start to run, desperate to put as much space between Jaxon and myself as I can manage. I have no idea where I'm running to, and I don't think it would matter even if I did. Not when I don't have a clue where anything is in this place.

I take a left at the end of the hallway, operating on pure instinct. On my complete desperation to be anywhere but at that party. Anywhere but in Jaxon's very pissed off sights.

I have no idea what I did to make him so mad, have no idea why he blows so hot and cold with me. I've run into him four times since I got to this frozen hellhole and each time has been a different experience. Flirty the first time, blank the second, intense the third and furious the fourth. His moods change more quickly than the answers on my not so trusty eight ball.

I get to another dead end and this time I take a right. Seconds later I come upon a staircase, this one as plain and unfantastic as the main one is grand and ornate. I race down one flight and then another, to the second floor. Once there I take another right and don't stop until I run out of hallway.

I'm also out of breath and a little queasy, thanks to the altitude sickness that I just can't seem to shake. I stop a minute and let myself just breathe. As I do, the fear finally recedes enough that my rational mind can take over.

Suddenly, I feel like a total moron for freaking out and an even bigger idiot for running away from Jaxon, who performed the very scary act of biting into a strawberry while looking at me.

Deep inside I know it's more than that. It's the look on his face, the indolence of his body language, the very obvious fuck you in his eyes as he stared directly at me. But still, fleeing the way I did seems absurd now.

Not absurd enough to make me go back to that insanely uncomfortable party, but more than absurd enough to make me embarrassed by my actions.

As I straighten up and try to figure out what I'm going to do—heading back to my dorm room for more Tylenol and then some sleep is pretty much top of the list—I realize I'm standing in front of the school's library. And since I've never met a library or a book I didn't like, I can't resist opening the door and walking inside.

The moment I do, I get hit with the oddest feeling. Dread pools in my stomach and everything inside me tells me to turn around, to go back the way I came. It's the strangest feeling I've ever had in my life and for a second I think about giving in to it. But I've already done more than enough running for the day so I ignore the pressure in my lungs and the uneasy churning in my stomach and keep walking forward until I'm standing in front of the check-out desk.

Once there, I take a few minutes to just stand and look around the library. It only takes a second for the feeling of dread to dissipate and for absolute wonder to take its place. Because whoever runs this library is my kind of people. Part of it is the sheer number of books, tens of thousands of them at least, lined up in bookcase after bookcase. But there are other things, too.

Gargoyles perched on random bookshelves, looking down as if guarding the books.

A few dozen dreamcatchers, interspersed with sparkling ribbons, hanging from the ceiling in what appears to be randomly spaced intervals.

All of the room's open spaces have been turned into study alcoves, filled with bean bags and overstuffed chairs and even a few hammocks where there is room for them.

But the piece de resistance, the thing that has me dying to meet the librarian, are the stickers plastered everywhere. On the walls, on the bookshelves, on the desks and chairs and computers. Everywhere. Big stickers, little stickers, Funny stickers, encouraging stickers, brand name stickers, emoji stickers, sarcastic stickers ... The list goes on and on and there's a part of me that wants to wander the library until I read or look at every single one.

But there are too many for one tour—too many for a dozen tours, if I'm honest—so I decide to start this one by checking out the stickers I run across when following the gargoyles.

Because after seeing the rest of the library, I don't believe for one second that they are randomly placed. Which means, I desperately want to know what the librarian wants to show me.

The first gargoyle—a fierce looking thing with batwings and a furious snarl—stands guard over a shelf of horror novels. The bookshelf itself is decorated with Ghostbusters stickers and I can't help but laugh as I trace the spines of everyone from Daniel Webster to Mary Shelley, and from Edgar Allen Poe to Joe Hill. The fact that there's a special homage to Victor Hugo only makes it better, especially the tongue in cheek placement of three copies of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* right in the gargoyle's line of sight.

The second gargoyle—a squat fellow resting on his haunches on a pile of skulls—presides over a bookcase filled with books on human anatomy.

The fantasy bookshelf, complete with beautifully covered stories about dragons and witches, is home to the third gargoyle statue, who has really fantastical wings and just happens to be reading a book. Unlike the others, both of whom look ferocious, this guy looks mischievous, like he knows he's going to get in trouble for being up way past his bedtime, but he just can't stop reading the story.

I decide instantly that he's my favorite and pick out a book from his shelf to read tonight in case I can't sleep.

Then I keep wandering from statue to statue, from a small bookshelf on gothic architecture to a whole bookcase devoted to ghosts. On and on it goes, and the longer I'm in here the more convinced I am that the head librarian here is the coolest person ever—and has fantastic taste in books.

I make it to the end of the trail and turn the corner around the last bookshelf in search of the last gargoyle, only to find him pointing straight toward a half open door. There's a huge sign on the door that reads students must have permission to access this room, and—of course—that only makes me more curious. Especially since the light is on and there's some weird kind of music playing.

I try to place it, but as I get closer I realize it's not so much music as it is chanting in a language I don't recognize and certainly can't understand. Instantly, my curiosity turns to excitement.

When I was researching Alaska, I learned that there are twenty different languages spoken here, all from the state's native people and I can't help wondering if one of those languages is what I'm hearing. I hope so—I've been wanting a chance to listen to one of the native languages spoken. Especially since so many of them are threatened languages, including a couple that have less than four thousand speakers in the entire world. That these native languages are dying out is one of the saddest things I've ever heard.

Maybe, if I'm lucky, I can kill two birds with one stone here. I can meet the very cool librarian responsible for this library *and* get a lesson from her (because the voice is definitely

female) on one of the native languages. Even one of those options makes for a much better night than standing around being stared at at a party that was supposedly thrown to welcome me.

But when I step up to the door, ready to introduce myself, I find that the person doing the chanting isn't the librarian at all. She's a girl about my age, with long, wavy blonde hair and one of the most beautiful faces I've ever seen. Maybe *the* most beautiful.

She's holding open a book and reading from it, which explains the chanting I heard. I want to ask what language it is since I can't see the cover, but the way her head snaps up when I step over the threshold has the words drying up in my throat.

Whoever she is, she looks fierce, cheeks flushed and mouth open wide to let out the unique sounds of whatever language she is speaking. She stops mid-word, with what looks an awful lot like fury burning in her swirling gray eyes as she looks up at me.

Chapter Twelve

I fumble for an apology—or at least an excuse—but before I can come up with one, the rage is gone. In fact, it dissipates so quickly I can't be sure I didn't imagine it. Especially since the anger, or whatever it was, turns to welcome in an instant.

"You must be Grace," she says with a smile as she steps out from behind the table. "I've been looking forward to meeting you." She shoves a hand forward and I take it, bemused, as she continues, "I'm Lia and I have a feeling we're going to be really good friends."

It's not the strangest greeting I've ever gotten—that honor still belongs to Brant Hayward, whose version of *nice to meet you* was wiping his boogers all over my first day of school dress when we were both in the second grade—but it's a close second. Still, there's an infectiousness about her smile that has me grinning back and offering my own hand.

"I *am* Grace," I agree. "It's nice to meet you."

"Oh, don't be so formal," she tells me, gently steering me out of the room before I can mention that I want to look around. Seconds later, she's got the lights off and the door closed behind us, all in the most efficient way possible.

"Was that Inupiaq?" I ask as she starts steering me back toward the center of the library.

"Inupiaq?" she repeats, a confused look on her face.

“From that book. Was it Inupiaq? Or Haida?” I can feel myself blushing a little as I probably butcher the names. “Whatever language it was was beautiful. I thought maybe it might be one of the local languages.”

“Oh, no.” She laughs, a light, tinkling sound that perfectly matches the rest of her. “It’s actually a language I came across in my research. I don’t know what it’s called. I’m not even sure I’m pronouncing it correctly.”

“Well, it sounded amazing. —What kind of book was it in?” Now I wish more than ever that I’d gotten a look at the cover.

“A boring one,” she answers with a wave of her hand. “I swear this research project is going to kill me. Now come on, let’s go get some tea and you can tell me all about yourself. Much more interesting than a musty old research tome.”

I’m not so sure about that, but the tea part of her statement sounds wonderful, especially considering what just happened when I tried a Dr. Pepper. So does the idea of making a friend at this place where everyone looks at me like I have three heads ... or like I’m nothing.

“Are you sure you aren’t busy? I didn’t mean to interrupt. I just wanted to explore the library a little bit. I love the gargoyle theme. Very gothic castle.”

“It is, right? Ms. Royce is cool like that.”

“Oh, yeah? Let me guess. Dresses in black, wants to be a vampire. That kind of thing?”

“Actually, no. She’s more a hippie skirt and flower crown kind of woman.”

“Huh. I wouldn’t have expected that with this motif.” We’re passing through a sitting area with several black couches, each one dotted with purple throw pillows bearing different quotes from classic horror movies. My favorite is Norman Bates’ famous line from *Psycho*; “We

all go a little mad sometimes.” Although I’m also partial to the pillow next to it: “Be Afraid. Be very afraid,” from *The Fly*.

“Ms. Royce is big on Halloween,” Lia says with a roll of her eyes. “I don’t think she’s put everything away yet.”

Oh, right. Halloween was three days ago. I’ve been so focused on everything else that I pretty much forgot about it completely this year, even though Heather spent months making her flying genie costume.

Lia pushes the main door open and gestures for me to precede her. I wait while she turns off the lights then locks the door. “The library is usually closed on Sunday evenings, but I’m doing an independent study this semester so Ms. Royce lets me work late sometimes,” she explains.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize—“

“Stop apologizing, Grace.” She shoots me a vaguely exasperated look. “How were you supposed to know? I’m just telling why I have to lock things back up.”

“Good point,” I admit, a little surprised at how nice she’s being.

She starts down the hallway. “So, I’m assuming since you aren’t at the party Macy organized for you, that your first full day at our illustrious school hasn’t been as smooth as your cousin hoped they’d be.”

She’s got that right, but I’m not going to admit it when doing so sounds like I’m throwing Macy under the bus. Especially since Macy isn’t the problem. Jaxon’s hot and cold mood swings are—among other things.

“The party was good. I’ve just had a really long day. I needed a break for a few minutes.”

“I bet. Unless you’re coming from Vancouver or something, getting here is never easy.”

I shiver a little as wind whips through the hallway. “Yeah, I’m definitely not from Vancouver.”

She laughs. “I didn’t think so.” When I don’t volunteer anything else, she raises her brows. “Are you going to make me guess?”

“Oh, sorry. San Diego.”

She gives me an arch look at the apology, but she lets it go. “Oh, man. That’s the worst possible place to move here from.”

“It’s the worst possible place to move anywhere from,” I agree. “But especially here.”

“No doubt.” She looks me up and down, then smirks. “So, are you freezing in that dress?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve been freezing since I landed in Anchorage. Doesn’t matter what I wear—even before Macy talked me into putting on this thing.”

“Guess we better get you that tea then.” She nods to the staircase that’s just come into view. “My room’s on the fourth floor, if that’s okay?”

“Sure. Mine is too.”

“Awesome.”

Lia keeps talking as we make our way to the stairs, pointing out different rooms she thinks I need to know—the chem lab, the study lounge, the snack shop. Part of me wants to pull out my phone and take notes—or better yet, draw a map since I’m hopeless with directions, but that would probably look a little over the top, so I resist the urge. Instead, I just listen really hard and try to commit things to memory.

It feels stupid to be so uptight, especially when I used to be the one who could take everything in stride. Who could concentrate on the good stuff and let the bad stuff roll right off my back. But Alaska is so foreign and I'm so out of my element here that I'm trying to find something—anything—to grab onto that will make me feel safe.

Most days it's easier than admitting the truth—that I haven't felt safe since the day my parents died. That some days I'm sure I'll never feel safe again.

We finally make it back to Lia's room—she's in what I'm assuming is the West hallway, judging by its location in relation to mine. I'm a little surprised when she stops in front of the one door on the hallway, maybe on the whole floor, that doesn't have some kind of decoration on it.

My surprise must show, because she says, "It's been a rough year. I just wasn't up to decorating when I got back here."

"That really sucks. The rough year part, I mean. Not the decorating part."

"I knew what you meant." She smiles sadly. "My boyfriend died several months ago and everyone thinks I should be over it. But we were together a really long time. It's not that easy to just let him go."

"No, it's not." It's been a month since my parents died and I still feel like I'm in shock half the time.

Like I wake up every morning and for a minute, just a minute, I don't remember why I have the sinking feeling in my stomach.

I don't remember that they're gone and I'm never going to see them again.

I don't remember that I'm all alone.

And then it hits me all over again, and so does the grief.

Getting on that first plane this morning was the hardest thing I've ever done—besides burying them—and I think it's because it made their deaths sink in just a little more. Made me have to face the fact that I won't be living in San Diego anymore because my parents aren't there anymore. And they never will be again.

"My parents died last month." The words come out before I have a clue I'm going to say them. It's not like I usually just go around announcing that I'm an orphan to people. But something about the look on Lia's face when she talks about her boyfriend tells me she knows just how lost and messed up I feel.

"Oh my God, Grace." She turns white, her eyes going wide with shock and sympathy. "That's fucking awful."

I appreciate that she didn't say she was sorry. Sorry's one of those words you use if you screw something up. Or interrupt someone who is researching for her independent project. It's not what you say when someone dies. It's too banal for that. Too inane. Too pathetically useless.

"It really is, isn't it? It's really fucking awful that your boyfriend died, too."

"Yeah." She nods her head, smiles the saddest smile I've ever seen. "It is. He was the most amazing person I've ever known."

We just kind of stand there in the middle of her dorm room for a second, two people who look fine on the outside but who are destroyed on the inside. We don't talk, don't say anything at all. Just stay where we are and absorb the fact that someone else hurts as much as we do.

It's a crazy feeling. And an oddly comforting one.

Commented [SA92]: This is great!

Eventually, Lia moves over to her desk, where she has an electric kettle plugged in. She pours some water into it from the pitcher she also has on her desk, then turns it on before opening a jar of what looks like potpourri and scooping it into two tea strainers.

“Can I help with anything?” I ask, even though I’m out of my element. I’m not used to this much effort for a cup of tea—at my house if it didn’t come in a pre-packaged teabag, we didn’t make it.

“I’ve got it.” She nods to the second bed in the room, which she has set up as a kind of couch/daybed thing with a red comforter and a bunch of jewel toned throw pillows. “Go ahead and sit down.”

I do, wishing I was in yoga or sweat pants instead of this dress so I could sit like a normal person. Lia doesn’t talk much as she makes the tea, and I don’t either. Kind of hard to know where to take the conversation now that we’ve covered everything from dying languages to dead loved ones.

The silence drags on, and I start to feel uncomfortable. But it doesn’t take long for the teakettle to boil, thankfully, and then Lia’s setting a cup of tea down in front of me. “It’s my own special blend,” she says, holding her cup up to her mouth and blowing softly. “I hope you like it.”

“I’m sure it’s awesome.” I wrap my hands around my cup and nearly shudder with relief at finally being able to warm my fingers up. Even if it tastes terrible, it’s worth it to have a chance at not being cold.

“So how did the party go? I assume not well, considering you ended up in the library, but did you at least get to meet some people?”

“I did, yeah. They seemed nice enough.”

She laughs. “You’re a really bad liar.”

“Yeah, well, it seemed polite to try.” I take a sip of the tea, which has a really powerful floral taste that I’m not sure I care for. But it’s hot and that’s enough to have me taking another sip. “I’ve been told that before, though. The bad liar part, I mean.”

“You should probably work on that. At SCHOOL NAME, knowing how to lie well is practically Survival 101.”

It’s my turn to laugh. “I guess I’m in serious trouble, then.”

“I guess you are.” There’s no humor in her answer this time, and I realize suddenly that there was none in her original statement either.

“Wait,” I say, strangely discomfited by that fact. “What do you guys have to lie about that’s so important?”

That’s when Lia looks me straight in the eye and says, “Everything.”

Chapter Thirteen

I have no idea how to respond to that. I mean, what am I supposed to say? What am I supposed to think?~~Which totally creeps me out.~~

Plus, I have no idea how I'm supposed to respond to that. Tell~~Should I tell~~ her lying seems like a viable pastime? Tell her I don't want to be friends with a liar? Ask her what kind of liar *she* is and if anything she's told me so far has been the truth?

Just the thought boggles my mind, has me shifting uncomfortably on the bed as I try to figure out how to extricate myself from this mess. Nothing comes to mind, though, so ?

~~In the end, I don't do any of those things. Instead,~~ I take another sip of my tea instead, just to have something to do with my mouth besides talk.

"Don't look so scandalized," she tells me after a minute of awkward silence. "I'm just teasing, Grace."

"Oh, right." I laugh along with her, because what else can I~~se am I supposed to do?~~ Still, it doesn't feel right. Maybe because of how serious she looked when she told me that she lies about everything. Or maybe because I can't help wondering if that was the truth and these are just lies ... Either way, there's not much else for me to do but shrug and say "I figured you were just messing with me."

"I totally was. You should have seen--

My phone vibrates with several text messages in a row, cutting her off. I pull it out, figuring Macy finally got tired of waiting for me to return. Sure enough, my home screen is a series of texts from my cousin, each one a little more frantic than the one before it. Turns out she's been texting me for a while and I didn't notice before.

Macy: Hey, where'd you go?

Macy: I keep waiting for you to come back

Macy: Hey, where are you????

Macy: I'm coming to find you

Macy: Are you okay????

Macy: Answer me!!!!

Macy: What's going on?

Macy: Are. You. OK?????

I text her back a quick, *I'm good*, and my phone immediately buzzes again. A quick look at my cousin's all caps WHERE ARE YOU? and I know I'd better find her before she loses it completely.

"Sorry, Lia, but I've got to go. Macy's freaking out."

"Why? Because you left the party? She'll get over it."

"Yeah, but I think she's actually worried." I don't tell her about what happened with those guys last night, don't mention that that's probably why Macy is so upset that she can't find me. Instead, I focus on my phone and I text back Lia's room, before standing then stand-up.

"Thanks for the tea."

"At least stay a couple more minutes, finish your drink." She looks half-amused, half-disappointed as she continues, "—You don't want your cousin to think she can boss you around."

“She’s not bossing me around. I think she’s afraid I’m upset or something.” I carry my cup over to the bathroom sink. “Besides, if I know her, she’s on her way to your room right now.”

“You’re probably right. Macy does tend to be the hysterical type.”

“I didn’t say that—“

A knock on the door cuts me off, followed by Macy calling my name. “Grace? Are you in there?”

Lia just grins at me in an I told you so kind of way. “Don’t worry about washing the cup,” she says, taking it from my hands. “Just go show Macy that you’re not crying your eyes out. And that I didn’t murder you.”

“She wouldn’t think that. She’s just worried about me.” Still, I make a beeline for the door, then throw it open to reveal my cousin—as predicted—on the other side. “I’m right here,” I tell her with a grin.

“I’m right here,” I tell my cousin as I swing the door open. “Oh, thank God!” She throws her arms around me. “I thought something had happened to you.”

“What could possibly happen to me when nearly everyone else is at the party? ~~inside the~~ I just went for a walk.”

“I don’t know.” She looks suddenly uncertain. “Lots of things ...”

“Like what? Death by eraser?” I can’t keep the confusion out of my tone.

“I think Macy was worried you might have gone outside,” Lia interjects. “If you had wandered out in that dress, you’d be close to dead by now.”

“Yes, exactly!” Macy seizes on the excuse. “I didn’t want you to freeze to death before your first full day in Alaska is over.”

~~"Yes, exactly!" Macy seizes on the excuse. "I didn't want ou to freeze to death on your first night in Alaska."~~

"Seriously? I'm not that stupid, Mace."

"I know, I know. It's just, if you were upset and not thinking straight ... stranger things have happened, okay?"

"I guess so?" It's more a question than a statement, because how dumb does my cousin think I am?

"Just promise to let me know where you are when you need to wander off, okay?"

I start to make a joke about not needing a babysitter, but it's pretty obvious that she's serious. Which would be weird except, maybe, possibly, it's nice to have someone worrying about me. It's not like I've gotten much of that since my parents died.

"Okay, I promise." I hold my hands up in surrender. "But you need to promise to stop freaking out so much if I decide to check out the library or something."

"Is that where you found Lia?" she asked, shooting Lia a grateful look.

"It is. I was working on a project and she wandered in, fascinated by Ms. Royce's gargoyles."

"They are pretty cool," Macy agrees.

"They're completely awesome.† I can't wait to meet her." I turn to Lia. "Thanks again, for everything."

"No worries." She grins at me. "Stop by again some time. We'll do mani/pedis or facials or something."

"Sounds good."

"Hey, I want in on that!" Macy says indignantly.

Lia rolls her eyes. “Obviously, you’re invited, too.” And then she closes the door in our

faces.

Which ... let’s face it, seems weird, considering how friendly she’s been all night. Then again, the second Macy showed up, everything about Lia got a lot sharper. Maybe her abrupt goodnight has more to do with my cousin than it does with me.

And when Macy whispers, “I can’t believe you got invited to Lia Harrington’s room,” like I somehow found the Holy Grail or cured cancer or something, it only reinforces the idea that Lia was objecting to her, not me.

Macy doesn’t say anything for long seconds as we start the walk back to our room. Then, finally, she whispers, “I can’t believe you got invited to Lia Harrington’s room.” The way she says it makes it sound like I found the Holy Grail or something. But it’s not like I’m going to bring that up right now, so I settle on a simple, “It wasn’t hard. She seems really’s-really nice.”

“She’s also the most popular girl in school,” Macy tells me as we start winding our way down the hallway. “Getting in with her is really hard to do—especially lately, when she’s been so. And lately, the most reclusive.”

“Yeah, well, after losing her boyfriend, I figure she’s entitled.”

Macy’s eyes go huge. “She told you about that?”

“Yeah.” A sickening thought occurs to me. “Is it a secret?”

“No. It’s just, I’ve heard she doesn’t talk about Hudson.”

“That’s not surprising. And she didn’t really talk about him to me. Just told me that he died.”

“Yeah. Six months ago. It kind of rattled the school.”

“Was he a student here?”

Commented [SA93]: The dichotomy of Lia is great. I’d like to see even more sweetness vs. coldness from her as the story progresses. I could see Grace musing just a bit on how she could invite her to do facials one second and slam the door in her face the next.

“He was, but he graduated the year before he died. Still, it really freaked a lot of us out.”

“I bet.” I want to ask what happened, but it seems rude, so I just let it go.

Macy must feel the same way, because all of a sudden she changes the subject. “Are you hungry? You didn’t eat anything at the party.”

I start to say yes—I haven’t eaten since ~~I grabbed a pretzel in Seattle~~ the bowl of Frosted Flakes Macy poured me this morning from her stash—but for some reason the altitude sickness must be back because the mention of food has my stomach rumbling, and not in a good way.

“You know, I think I’m just going to go to bed. I’m not feeling so great.”

For the first time, Macy looks worried. “If you aren’t feeling better in the morning, I think we’d better stop by the nurse. You’ve been here over twenty-four hours now. You should be starting to get used to the altitude.”

“When I googled it, it said twenty-four to forty-eight hours. If I’m not better after tomorrow’s classes, I’ll go. Okay?”—“You’re probably exhausted. What time did you get up this morning?”

“If you’re not better after tomorrow’s classes, I’m pretty sure my dad will drag you there himself. He’s been frantic about you since you asked him to leave you in San Diego to finish up your quarter.”

“I know. I pretty much had to push him out of the car when I dropped him at the airport.”

An awkward silence descends, probably because we’re both talking around the reason he was in San Diego with me a month ago. It’s one of the hardest parts about losing my parents—besides, you know, actually *losing* them. The fact that no one knows what to say about the accident, including me most days.

“Grace—” Macy starts, a pained look on her face.

“Don’t worry about it,” I interrupt, because I’m feeling crappy enough right now without having to talk about my parents. “What happened, happened. There’s no undoing it, no fixing it. And honestly, I’m just too tired to talk about it right now.”

She nods. “Okay.” But she still looks worried as she holds the door to the landing for me.

“Like 4 a.m., but I was too nervous to sleep, so I’m not sure that really counts.” “Yeah, let’s get you to bed.” Macy shakes her head. “What time is it?” I ask as we trek toward our wing. “I can’t believe how tired I am.”

She laughs. “It’s eight o’clock, party animal.”

“I’ll party next week. After I finally get some sleep ... and after this stupid altitude sickness goes away.” I put a hand to my stomach as the nausea from earlier returns with a vengeance.

“I’m a moron.” Macy rolls her eyes at herself. “Planning a party on your first day here was a bad move on my part. Sorry.”

“No worries. You were just trying to help me meet people.”

“I was *trying* to show off my fabulous baby-older cousin—“

“I’m ~~younger~~ older by like six months.”

“~~Younger is younger~~ Older is older, isn’t it?” She grins at me. “Anyway, I was trying to show you off and help you get acclimated. I didn’t think about the fact that you might need a day or two to just breathe.”

“I’m breathing now, aren’t I?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.”

We make it to our room and Macy unlocks the door with a flourish. Just in time, too, because my stomach revolts about two seconds after I walk in the door.

I barely make it to the bathroom, before I throw up ~~the tea I just drank~~ a noxious combination of tea and Dr. Pepper.

Commented [SA94]: This feels maybe a tiny bit over the top and also makes it feel obvious that Lia gave her something harmful. She just drank the tea and they talked about how she didn't eat anything else, so wouldn't she question what was in the tea? Maybe better to just have her feel queasy from nerves after the party, and it intensifies now?

Commented [WU95]: Better with the altitude sickness?

Chapter ~~Fourteen~~ive

I spend the next fifteen minutes dry heaving into the toilet while Macy stands by the door and asks over and over again if I'm okay. I'm too busy attempting to throw up the inside of my stomach to answer, which I guess is an answer in and of itself.

The ~~nausea~~stomach cramps finally stops about half an hour after ~~they~~ it started, but by then I'm sweating and shaking and so weak I can barely stand up exhausted and the headache is back full force. After I rinse my mouth out, Macy tries to help me to my bed, but I won't let her. ———“I don't want you getting sick too.”

“Should I get the nurse?” ~~she~~ Macy asks, walking behind me, arms outstretched as I make my way to the bed. “I think I should get the nurse.”

“Let's give it a little while longer.”

“I don't think—”

“Older cousin prerogative.” I shoot her a grin I'm far from feeling. “”If I'm not better in the morning, we'll call the nurse.”“I'm fine,” I tell her. “It's just a stomach bug.”

“Are you sure?”

“Considering I’ve had more than enough attention since I got to this school? Yes. Definitely.” the room is spinning, my stomach is on fire and I just spent the last half an hour throwing up, yeah. I’d say I’m pretty sure.”

“What can I do?”

I fall onto the bed, not even bothering to strip off the dress I’m wearing or shove down the comforter before curling into a ball. “You can kill me,” I say as my stomach pitches and rolls in the most unpleasant way possible.

“Not an option,” she answers.

“Then I think I’m okay.” One look at her face has me clarifying, “Or at least as okay as I can be, under the circumstances.”

“That’s not very okay.”

I laugh, then immediately regret it as my stomach starts cramping again. It’s all I can do not to start moaning from the pain. Stupid stress, stupid lowered immune system, stupid virus altitude sickness, stupid universe.

“I think I should get the nurse.” Macy makes a beeline for the door.

“What’s she going to do? Tell me to drink some ginger ale and get some sleep? I’m trying to sleep and I promise, I’ll drink something as soon as I think I can keep it down.”

Besides getting the nurse to come check on me will just underscore the fact that my mom isn’t here to take care of me.

That she isn’t here to climb into bed with me and stroke my hair as we stream some ridiculous rom-com.

Isn't here to kiss my forehead and make me homemade soup and tell me funny stories that make me laugh even when I feel like crap.

No, getting the nurse is exactly what I don't want to have happen right now, when I'm so nauseous that my defenses are lowered and I'm afraid I'll start crying any second.

Macy doesn't look happy by my refusal, but eventually she nods. Then proceeds to hover over me until I finally snap and order her to, "Go to sleep. I promise, I'll wake you if I need you."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Fine, suit yourself." It costs me a lot of pain and even more nausea, but I manage to roll over, figuring she'll stop watching if there's nothing to see. "I'm going to try to sleep."

"You're going to freeze like that."

She's probably right, but I don't have the energy to move one more part of my body, let alone the energy to crawl under the covers. "I'll be fine."

She snorts. "Yeah, right." The next thing I know, she's draping a thick, fleece blanket over me. "How's that?"

I snuggle into the softness, my head swimming as sleep beckons despite my upset stomach. "Perfect."

"Good. I'll put another one on the foot of your bed, in case you get cold in the middle of the night."

"Thanks, Mace." My words sound slurred to my own ears.

"You're welcome."

I drift in and out of sleep as my cousin Macy washes her face and changes into her pajamas. But right around the time she turns off the light and crawls into bed, another wave of

~~pain-nausea~~ rolls over me. I ride it out, still trying to ignore how much I wish my mom was here to baby me a little, and eventually fall into a fitful sleep, one I don't wake from until Macy's alarm goes off at six-thirty the next morning.

I wake up disoriented, trying to remember where I am and whose godawful alarm is blaring in my ear. It all comes flooding back—my parents, the plane ride, Alaska, the altitude sickness-my stomach ache—and I take stock of my body, trying to figure out how I feel now that I've gotten some sleep. After ~~one~~^{an} additional ~~two trip~~^{strip} to the bathroom around three to dry heave my guts up, the nausea has receded-my stomach has finally stopped twisting itself into knots, which is a giant plus. Everything else feels okay—my head has stopped spinning and while my throat feels dry, it doesn't hurt either.

Huh. Looks like the internet was right about the whole twenty-four to forty-eight hours to acclimate thing. I'm good as new.

At least until I sit up and realize the

The rest of my body is another story³, ~~though~~. Nearly eEvery muscle I have aches like I've just climbed ~~Denalia mountain~~—after running a marathon. I'm pretty sure it's just dehydration combined with how tense I was yesterday, but either way I'm in no mood to get up. I'm certainly in no mood to put on a happy face for my ~~have my~~ first day of classes.

I lay back down and pull the covers over my head, trying to decide

~~But I'm not sure laying here staring at the ceiling is going to help me out, either. I'm still trying to decide~~ what I want to do. I'm still laying there five minutes later when Macy wakes up with a grumble. The first thing she does is slap at her alarm until it stops—something I am eternally grateful for considering she picked the most grating, annoying sound ever created to wake up to—but it only takes her a second to climb out of bed and come over to me.

“Grace?” she whispers softly, like she wants to check on me but doesn’t want to wake me up all at the same time.

“I’m okay,” I tell her. “Just sore, ~~probably from all the throwing up.~~”

~~“That’s dehydration—you need to drink more up here and the throwing up didn’t help. Plus your body is trying to figure out how to deliver oxygen most efficiently to all your muscles. It’ll go away in a day or two.”~~ She crosses to the

~~“Let me get you some water,” she says, crossing to the fridge it in the corner of the room and pullsing out a pitcher of water.—~~She pours two glasses and then hands me one as she settles back onto her bed.

~~She spends a minute texting—Cam, I figure—before tossing her phone aside and looking at me.~~ “I have to go to my classes today—I’ve got tests in three of them—but I’ll come back and check on you when I can.”

I’m pretty much loving her assumption that I’m not going to class, so I don’t argue. Except to say, “You don’t have to go out of your way to check on me. I’m feeling much better.”

“Good, then you can consider this a mental health day. Of the ‘Holy crap, I just moved to Alaska!’ variety.”

“There’s an actual mental health day for that?” I ask, moving around until I’m sitting up with my back against the wall.

Macy snorts. “There are whole mental health *months* for that. Alaska’s not easy.”

It’s my turn to snort. “No ~~kiddingshit~~. I’ve been here less ~~than than twenty-fourforty-eight~~ hours and I’ve already figured that out.”

“That’s just because you’re afraid of wolves.”

“And bears,” I admit without a flicker of embarrassment. “As any sane person is.”

She ignores me. “Take the day and just rest. Read a book, watch some trash TV, eat my stash of junk food if your stomach feels up to it. ~~But~~ Dad will let your teachers know you’ll be starting tomorrow instead of today.”

I hadn’t even thought of Uncle Finn. “Will your dad be okay with me skipping class?”

“He’s the one who suggested it.”

“How does he know—“ I break off when a knock sounds at the door. “Who—“

“My dad,” Macy says as she crosses the room and throws open the door with a flourish.

“Who else?”

Except it’s not Uncle Finn at all. It’s Flint, who takes one look at Macy in her tiny nightshirt and me in last night’s dress and smeared make-up, and starts grinning like an idiot.

“Looking good, ladies.” He gives a low whistle. “Guess you decided to take the tea party up a notch or four last night, huh?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Macy taunts as she makes a beeline for the bathroom and the privacy it affords. I don’t bother to answer, just stick my tongue out at him. He laughs and wiggles his eyebrows in response.

“I *would* like to know,” Flint tells me as he crosses over to sit on the end of my bed.

“Where’d you run off to? And why?”

Because telling him the whole truth involves trying to explain my bizarre reaction to Jaxon—not to mention everything that came after-- I settle for part of the truth. “The altitude really started getting to me. I felt like I was going to throw up, so I came back to the room.”

That wipes the smile off his face. “How are you now? Want me to take you to the nurse? Altitude sickness isn’t anything to fool around with. Can you breathe okay?”

“I can breathe fine. I swear,” I add, when he doesn’t look convinced. “I’m feeling almost normal today. Just had to get used to the mountains, I guess.”

“Speaking of mountains.” Flint’s crazily appealing grin is back. “That’s why I came by. A bunch of us are having a snowball fight after dinner tonight. Thought you might want to join in ... if you feel okay, I mean.”

“A snowball fight?” I shake my head. “I don’t think I should.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t even know how to make a snowball, let alone how to throw one.”

He looks at me like I’m insane. “You pick up snow, you pack it into a ball, and then you throw it at the nearest person.” He uses his hands to mime his words. “It’s not exactly hard.”

“Yeah, but I don’t even know how to run on snow.”

“You’re being a little ridiculous, Grace. You know that, right?”

“I’m being serious. If I run on snow, I’m probably going to end up on my ass.”

“It’s snow, not ice. It’s not slippery.” He rolls his eyes. “You’re from San Diego, right? Ever run on the beach?”

“Of course. Lots of time. But snow is nothing like sand—“

“You’re right. It’s a lot easier to run on because it doesn’t suck you under and try to hold you there every time you take a step.” He gives me a grin that can only be described as charming. “Come on. Give it a try. I promise I won’t let you fall.”

“Careful, Grace.” Macy comes out of the bathroom, her hair wrapped in a towel. “Never trust a ...” She trails off when Flint turns to her, brows raised.

“They’re having a snowball fight after class today,” I tell her. “He wants us to join.” He hadn’t invited Macy in so many words, but there’s no way I’m going without her. And from the sudden smile on her face, I’m guessing I made the right choice.

“Seriously? We have to go, Grace. Flint’s snowball fights are legendary around here.”

“That doesn’t exactly raise my confidence level, considering I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“It’ll be fine,” they both say at the same time.

It’s my turn to raise my brows as I look back and forth between them.

“Trust me,” Flint implores. “I’ll take good care of you.”

“Don’t trust him,” Macy tells me. “Put a snowball in the boy’s hand and he’s utterly diabolical. But that doesn’t mean it won’t be fun.”

I still think it’s a bad idea, but Flint and Macy are my only two actual friends at Katsmere Academy. Who knows what will happen with Lia and as for Jaxon ... Jaxon is a lot of things, but I wouldn’t exactly call him a friend. Or even friendly, for that matter, even if he did save me from freezing to death two nights ago.

“Okay, fine,” I give in with a flourish. “But if I end up dying in the middle of the fight, I’m going to haunt both of you forever.”

“I’m pretty sure you’ll survive,” Macy assures me.

Flint, on the other hand, just winks. “And if not I can think of worse ways to spend eternity.”

Before I can come up with a response to that, he leans over and drops a kiss on my cheek. And then he’s gone, slipping out the door without a backward glance.

Chapter Fifteen

“Did he just ...” Macy gasps out after he shuts the door behind him.

“It’s not a big deal,” I assure her.

_____ “Flint just ...” Apparently the word is still failing her because she taps her cheek in the same spot Flint just kissed mine.

_____ “It’s *not* a big deal,” I say again. “It’s not like he planted one on me or anything. He was just being friendly.”

_____ “He’s never been friendly like that to *me*.”

_____ “Yeah, well, you’ve got a boyfriend. He’s probably afraid Cam will kick his ass.”

_____ Macy laughs. She actually laughs, which ... okay. The idea of her thin, lanky boyfriend kicking Flint’s ass does seem a little absurd. But still, shouldn’t she at least pretend to defend him?

_____ “You want me to talk to him? See if he’ll kiss *you* next time?”

_____ “Yeah, cuz that will happen.” She unwraps her hair, starts brushing out the wet strands.

_____ There’s something in her tone that has me narrowing my eyes. “Wait. Do you want it to happen?”

_____ She grabs some product, smooths it through her hair. “What do you mean?”

_____ “You know exactly what I mean.” I make my way over to her. “Do you have a crush on Flint?”

_____ “No! Of course not!” She avoids looking me in the eye.

_____ “Yeah, because that’s convincing.” I roll my eyes. “If you want to be with Flint, shouldn’t you break up with Cam and go for it?”

_____ “I don’t want to be with Flint.”

_____ “Mace—”

_____ “I’m serious, Grace. Maybe I used to have a crush on him, back in ninth grade. But that was a long time ago and it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Because of Cam.” I watch her face closely in the mirror as she starts to blow dry her long, blond hair.

“Because I love Cam, yes,” she says as she yanks a brush through her hair a little too hard. “And also because it’s not like that here.”

“Not like what?”

“The different groups. They don’t mix that much.”

“Yeah, I noticed that at the party last night. But just because they *don’t*, doesn’t mean they *can’t*, right? I mean if you like Flint and he likes you—”

“I don’t like Flint!” she says loud enough to be heard over the dryer ... and three rooms down. “And he definitely doesn’t like me. And if I did like him, it wouldn’t matter anyway, because ...”

“Because what? He’s popular?”

“It’s more than that.”

“More than *what*? What is this? The Breakfast Club?”

A knock sounds on the door before she can answer.

“How many people stop by your room before seven-thirty in the morning?” I ask as I cross to answer the knock. Macy doesn’t answer, just kind of shakes her head and grins as she goes back to drying her hair.

I pull open the door to find my uncle staring at me worriedly. “How are you feeling, Grace? Macy said you were throwing up last night.”

“I’m better, Uncle Finn. The nausea’s gone and so is the headache.”

“You’re sure?” He gestures for me to climb back into my bed, so I do—a little gratefully, if I’m being honest. I’ve gotten so little sleep the last two nights that I feel like I’m in a fog, even if the altitude sickness has finally gone away.

“Good.” He puts a hand on my forehead, like he’s testing if I have a fever.

I start to crack a joke about altitude sickness not being a virus, but as he follows he hand on my forehead with a kiss to the top of my head, I get choked up. Because right now, with his eyebrows furrowed and his mouth curled into a frown that only makes his dimples more apparent, Uncle Finn looks so much like my dad that it takes every ounce of willpower I have not to cry.

“I still think Macy’s right,” he continues, oblivious to how broken I suddenly feel. “You should spend the day resting and start class tomorrow. Losing your parents, the move, Katsmere Academy, Alaska—it’s a lot to get used to, even without altitude sickness.”

I nod, look away. It’s strange, but it’s always easier to get through the day when people don’t acknowledge what’s happened to me. It’s when they’re sympathetic, concerned—like Uncle Finn—that it gets harder to hang onto my composure.

He must recognize my struggle, because he doesn’t say anything else. Just pats my hand before wandering back to the built in vanity where Macy is still drying her hair.

If they talk, I can’t hear it over the blow dryer, so I just tune it all out. I pull my covers up to my chin, roll over on my side. And wait for the pain of missing my parents to pass.

I hold my arms out to encompass everything on my side of the room. “All this *and* you’re willing to sacrifice your junk food for me? You know I totally won the cousin lottery, right?”

“Grand prize,” she agrees, totally deadpan. “Now go back to sleep while I get ready.”

I don’t plan to fall asleep, but I do anyway. The next time I wake up it’s after one and my stomach is growling pretty much nonstop. This time, though, the discomfort is because it’s been more than twenty-four hours since I’ve put anything that even resembles food in it.

There’s a jar of peanut butter and a box of crackers on top of the fridge, and I avail myself of both of them. Four tablespoons of peanut butter and an entire sleeve of crackers later and I finally feel human again.

I also feel trapped—inside this room and inside the school. I may not be a great athlete or anything, but I’ve always at least taken a walk every day. This being cooped up inside because it’s too cold to step foot outside is a miserable experience.

I try to ignore the restlessness, try to watch one of my favorite shows on Netflix or read the magazine I didn’t finish on the plane. I even text Heather, though I know she’s at school, hoping she can message back and forth with me for a while. Except, according to the one text she does manage to send back, she’s about to take a calculus test, so definitely no distraction there.

Nothing else I try sticks either, so helps. Finally I decide to just go for it. Maybe a walk around the Alaskan wilderness~~along the Alaskan tundra~~ is exactly what I need to clear my head.

But deciding to go for a walk and actually getting ready to go for one are two different things up here. Because I’m not a total moron, I take a quick shower and then google how to dress for an Alaskan winter. Turns out the answer is very carefully, even when it’s only November.

_____ Once I pull up a site that looks reputable, the clothes Macy made sure I have make a lot more sense. I start with the wool tights she got for me and one of my tank tops, then add a layer of long underwear—pants and shirt. After the underwear, I slip into fleece pants in hot pink (of course) and a fleece jacket in gray. The site gives me the option of another, heavier jacket to go over this one, but it's nowhere near as cold as it's going to get in a couple of months~~November~~ ~~not January~~, so I decide to skip it and go straight for the hat, scarf, gloves and socks. Finally, I finish with the down filled hooded parka my uncle got me and a pair of the snow boots rated for Denali ~~the tundra~~ that are at the bottom of my closet..

A quick look in the mirror tells me I look as ridiculous as I feel. But I figure it'll look even more ridiculous if I freeze to death on my first full day in Alaska, so I ignore the feeling. Besides, if I end up getting really warm during my walk, I can take the fleece layer off—or so the online guide suggests, as sweat is the enemy up here. Apparently walking around in wet clothes can lead to hypothermia ... along with everything else up here.

I leave Macy a note telling her I'm going to go explore the school grounds—I'm not stupid enough to actually wander out past the wall into the wilderness~~onto the tundra~~, where there are wolves and bears and God only knows what else. Normally, I would text her, but I don't want her to freak out and come running back here when she realizes I'm going outside. But I also don't want her to show up at the room and not know where I am, thereby causing a repeat of last night's panic. A note on her bed seems like the perfect compromise.

Once it's written and in plain sight, I head out. As I walk down the stairs, I ignore pretty much everyone I come across—which isn't many people, honestly, since almost everyone else is in class right now. I should probably feel guilty that I'm not, but to be honest, I just feel relieved.

_____ Once I'm on the ground floor, I take the first outside door I can find, and then nearly change my mind ~~feeel~~ as the wind and cold all but slap me in the face.

_____ ——— Maybe I should have put that extra layer on after all ...

It's too late now, so I pull my hoodie up over my head, and duck my scarf covered face down into my parka's high collar. Then I set out across the yard, despite the fact that every instinct I have is screaming at me to go back inside.

But I've always heard you're supposed to start something how you plan to end it and I am *not* going to be a prisoner inside the school for the next two years. Over my dead freaking body.

I shove my hands in my pockets and begin to walk. At first I'm so miserable that all I can think about is the cold and how it feels against my skin, despite the fact that pretty much every inch of me ~~it~~ is covered up in multiple layers.

But the more I walk, the warmer I become, ~~though~~, so I up my pace and finally get the chance to start looking around. The sun actually rose about two hours ago—at nearly eleven-ten a.m.-- so this is my first daylight look at the wilderness. ~~tundra~~.

I'm struck by how beautiful everything ~~is in its starkness~~, even here on the campus grounds. ~~The land is flat, really flat, with a layer of permafrost followed by a thick layer of white snow on top of it.~~ We're on the side of a mountain, so everything is sloped, which means I'm constantly walking up or down one hill or another—which isn't easy considering the altitude, but at least I'm breathing a lot easier than I was two days ago.

_____ There aren't a lot of different plants here right now, but there are a number of evergreens lining the different walkways and clustered at different points around campus. They're a beautiful green against the backdrop of white snow that covers nearly everything out there.

_____ And that too is beautiful. I'd never seen snow before two nights ago and now that it's daylight and I can really see it, I'm struck by the sight of it. Even though—~~Sure,~~ most of the snow here has a ton of footprints in it, it's still really gorgeous to look at. Besides, but I actually like that. The footprintthe footprints. Theys give me something to follow.

_____ Curious what it feels like—but not stupid enough to take my gloves off—I bend down and scoop up a handful, then let it slip through my fingers just to see how it falls. When my hand is empty, I bend down and scoop up some more, then do what Flint said earlier and pat it into a ball.

_____ It's easier than I thought it would be, and it only takes a few seconds before I'm hurling it as hard as I can at the nearest tree. I watch with satisfaction as it hits the branches and explodes.

_____ I make a few more snowballs, just for practice, as I continue walking around the grounds.

_____ There are several buildings out here besides the castle and I pause to look at most of them from a safe distance. Class is in session, after all, and the last thing I want is to be caught trying to peek in through the windows like some kind of weirdo.

_____ Besides, each cottage—and they do look like cottages—has a sign in front of it that names the cottage and says what it's used for. I pause when I get to one of the larger cottages. It's labeled *Tanana*: Art, and my heart speeds up a little just looking at it. I've been sketching and painting since I understood crayons can do more than color in coloring books-- and part of me wants nothing more than to run up the snowlined path and throw open the door, just to see what kind of art studio they have out here that I can work in.

_____ I'm immediately intrigued by the art studio—I've been sketching and painting since I understood crayons can do more than color in coloring books—and I want nothing more than to

~~go check it out.~~ But classes are in session and I don't want to draw attention to myself. Besides, I'm sure I'll have a chance to see it when I start my own classes tomorrow.

But classes are in session, so I settle for pulling out my phone and taking a quick pic of the sign. I'll google the word *tanana* later, figure out what language it is and what it means.

I kind of want to know what *all* the words mean, so as I continue walking past the different outlying buildings—some larger than others—I snap a picture of each sign so I can look up the words later. Plus, I figure it'll help me remember where everything is, since I don't know where my classes are yet.

I am a little concerned about having too many classes out here, because what am I supposed to do? Run back to my room and get all these clothes on between classes? If so, exactly how long are their passing periods here at Katsmere? Because the six minutes I got at my old school isn't exactly going to cut it.

When I reach the end of the scattered row of buildings, I find a stone-lined trail that seems to wind its way around the grounds to the other side of the castle. Since I haven't begun to explore over there, I decide to follow it, just to see what else I can find out here.

I keep walking and realize that every building on the grounds—except for the castle itself—is built on those wooden popsicle like stilts I saw on the bottom of the buildings in town yesterday. I make a mental note to google why when I'm back inside and can actually take my gloves off to use my phone, then keep walking along a stone-lined trail I find toward the side of the castle. The Turns out, the further I get from the main building, the worse the wind gets, and I pick up my pace ~~even more to try to stay warm.~~ So much for getting too hot and taking off

a layer like that website-site suggested. Pretty sure the threat of turning into a Grace flavored popsicle gets a little more real with every second that passes.

As I take the trail, I go by a few more clumps of trees, a pond that is completely frozen over that I would love to ice skate on if I can balance with all these clothes on, and a couple more small buildings. One is labeled ART STUDIOSHILA: SHOP and the other says CHINOOK: DANCE STUDIO over the door.

The signs surprise me a little—I don't know what I expected of Katsmere Academy, but I guess it wasn't that it would have everything a regular high school has and so much more. Admittedly, my only knowledge of rich boarding schools comes from my mom's old DVD of Dead Poet's Society that she made me watch with her once a year. In that movie, Weldon Academy was super strict, super harsh and super stuck-up. So far, Katsmere Academy only seems to be one of the three.

The wind is getting worse, so once again I pick up my pace, following the trail past a bunch of larger trees. These aren't evergreens, their leaves long gone and their branches coated in frost and dripping with icicles. I pause to study a few of them because they're beautiful, and because the light refracting through them sends rainbows dancing on the ground at me feet.

I'm charmed by this little bit of whimsy, so much that I don't even mind the wind for a second because it's what's making the rainbows dance. Eventually, though, I get too cold to stand still and I make my way out of the trees

~~I'm immediately intrigued by the art studio—I've been sketching and painting since I understood crayons can do more than color in coloring books—and I want nothing more than to go check it out. But classes are in session and I don't want to draw attention to myself. Besides, I'm sure I'll have a chance to see it when I start my own classes tomorrow.~~

——— So I keep following the trail, through a large clump of what look like Christmas trees. They aren't that big—none of the trees out here are because of the cold wind—but they are beautiful, especially coated in frost the way they are. On the other side of the trees is to find another frozen pond, ~~and~~ this one is obviously meant for social gatherings because there are several seats around it, along with a snow topped gazebo several yards away.

I take a couple steps toward the gazebo, thinking I might sit down for a minute, before I realize that it's already occupied—by Lia and ~~the guy from the party last night~~ Jaxon.

Chapter Sixteen

~~The one who sent me running like a scared little rabbit the second he looked at me.~~

——— I swore

——— ~~I swore~~ to myself that I wasn't going to go running like a scared rabbit the next time I saw Jaxon, b ~~let that happen the next time I saw him,~~ but everything about this conversation screams intense. And private.

The way ~~their~~ his and Lia's bodies are angled toward each other but aren't actually touching.

The rigidness of their shoulders.

The way they're both wrapped up in arguing ~~overwith~~ whatever the other one is saying.

~~There's~~ There's a part of me that wishes I was closer, that wishes I could hear what ~~he's~~ talking to Lia ~~they're talking~~ about even though it is absolutely none of my business. But any people who look the way these two do, obviously have some kind of problem and I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to know what it is.

I don't know why it matters to me, except there's an intimacy to their fighting that makes my stomach hurt just a little. Which is ridiculous considering I barely know Jaxon. And because of the four times we've run into each other, two of those he's blown past me like I don't even exist. That in and of itself is a pretty big hint that he wants nothing to do with me.

Except I keep remembering the look on his face when he chased those guys away from me the first night. The way his eyes went all dark, their pupils blown out, when he touched my face and wiped the drop of blood from my lips. ~~don't trust him not to hurt her.~~ The way his body brushed against mine and it felt like everything inside of me was holding its breath, just waiting for a chance to come alive.

We didn't feel like strangers then.

Which is probably why I keep watching them, against my better judgment.

They're arguing fiercely now, so much so that I can hear their raised voices, even as far away as I am. I'm not close enough to actually make out the words, but I don't need to know what they're saying to know just how furious they both are.

And that's before Lia lashes out at him, her open palm cracking against his scarred cheek hard enough to have Jaxon's head flying back. He doesn't hit her back. In fact, he doesn't do anything at all until her palm comes flying at his face again.

This time, he catches her wrist in his hand and holds tight as she struggles to pull away. She's screaming full-out now, harsh sounds of rage and agony that claw their way inside of me and bring tears to my eyes.

I know those sounds. I know the agony that causes them and the rage that makes it impossible to contain them. I know how they come from deep inside, and how they leave your throat—and your soul—shredded in their wake.

Instinctively, I take a step toward her—toward them—galvanized by Lia's pain and the barely leashed violence that hangs in the air between them. But the wind picks up as I take that first step and I mean, sure, Lia seems like the kind of girl who can take care of herself—probably better than me, at least out here. But she's also fragile. I saw that last night, in how painfully skinny she is and how her hands shake when she's doing pretty much anything. Losing her boyfriend has really messed her up and I don't want some other guy to take advantage of that.

—All of a sudden he grabs onto her arm and that's when I creep a little closer, just to make sure she's okay. Which is also about the same time the wind picks up. And suddenly they're both staring at me with flat, black eyes that send a chill straight through me—that. A chill that has nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with them—Jaxon and Lia and the way they're looking at me. It's almost ... predatory. Like they're the predators and I'm the prey they can't wait to sink their teeth into.

It's an insane thought to have, but it's one I can't quite shake, even as I give both of them a little Lia a little wave and start. I thought Lia and I we might be becoming friends yesterday—

especially when she suggested doing mani/pedis together-- but it's obvious that friendship doesn't extend to whatever is happening here. Which is fine. The last thing I want to do is get in the middle of a fight between two people who obviously have some kind of history together. But I also don't want to leave them alone together Lia alone if ~~this guy might do something to hurt her~~their fight has deteriorated to her hitting him and him grabbing her.

All of which leaves me unsure of what I'm supposed to do now, stuck where I am, an awkward guard staring at both of them in an effort to prevent I don't know what while they stare right back at me.

When ~~the guy~~Jaxon takes a couple steps toward me, the same panic that hit me yesterday at the party slams through me again. As does the same odd fascination I've had from the beginning. I don't know what it is about him, but every time I catch sight of him, I feel something I can't ~~explain or even identify~~identify, something I have no ability to explain.

He advances a few more steps and my heart kicks up another notch or fifty. Still, I stand my ground—~~I'm not going to run from him~~I ran from Jaxon once. I'm not going to do it a second time. time, especially if Lia needs help.

But then, suddenly, Lia is she's the one grabbing him, holding him back, pulling him toward her. The dangerous look fades from her eyes (though not from his) until it's almost like it was never there, and she waves at me enthusiastically.

"Hi, Grace! Come join us."

Ummm, not in a million years. Not when every instinct I have is screaming at me to flee even though I don't know why. So instead of moving forward, I give her another little wave and call, "Actually, I've got to get back to my room before Macy sends out another search party. I just wanted to explore a little bit before I start classes tomorrow. Have fun!"

The last seems like major overkill considering the fury I sensed between them~~way they~~ look, but I tend to either clam up or babble when I'm nervous, so all in all, it's not a terrible performance. Or at least that's what I tell myself as I turn and start walking away as fast as I can without looking like I'm actually rushing.

Every step is a lesson in self-control as I have to force myself not to look back over my shoulder. Have to force myself not to check if he is still watching me. The prickle at the back of my neck says he is, but I ignore it.

Just like I ignore the weird feeling inside of me that has shown up every time~~both times~~ I've seen him. I assure myself it's nothing, that it doesn't matter. Because no way am I stupid enough to get a crush on the most popular—and the most dangerous-looking—boy in school.

Still, the urge to turn around stays with me—right up until Jaxon appears by my side, eyes gleaming with interest and sexy af hair blowing in the wind.

“What's the rush?” he asks, scooting in front of me so that he's walking backward and I'm forced to slow down.

“Nothing.” I look down so I don't have to look him in the eye. “I'm cold.”

“So which is it? Nothing?” He stops walking, which forces me to do the same, then puts a finger under my chin and presses up until I give in and met his eyes. Then he gives me a crooked little smile that does ridiculous things to my heart—the whole reason I'd been trying not to look at him to begin with. Especially considering what I just saw between him and Lia. “Or the cold?”

If I look closely, I can still see the imprint of her hand on his pale, scarred cheek. It pisses me off, more than it should considering I barely know the guy. Which is why I take a deliberate step to the side and say, “The cold. So if you'll excuse me ...”

“Are you really cold in all that gear?” he asks, moving until he’s once again in front of me. “Or is it just an excuse?”

“I don’t need to make excuses to you.” And yet I am, making excuses and trying to run away from him and what I just saw. Trying to run away from all the things he makes me feel when all I really want to do is grab onto him and hold on tight.

It’s an absurd thought, an absurd idea, but one that only gets stronger when he answers, “You’re right. You don’t.”

His words seem like a simple agreement, but there’s something in his tone, something in the way he looks at me, that turns them from acquiescence into challenge. From acknowledgment into plea.

“I need to go,” I tell him, because I do.

“So go.”

But even as he says it, I don’t move. I can’t. Not because he’s blocking my path, but because everything inside of me is responding to everything inside of him. Even the danger. Especially the danger, though I’ve never been that girl before, the one who takes risks just to see how they feel.

Maybe that’s why—instead of moving around him and running back to the castle like I should—I look him straight in the eye and ask, “What were you and Lia fighting about?”

I don’t know what I expect—his gaze to go flat again or him to tell me that it’s none of my business. Instead, he says, “My brother,” in a tone that doesn’t ask for sympathy, and warns that he won’t permit it.

It’s not the answer I was expecting, but as the very few pieces I have start fitting themselves together in my head, my heart plummets. “Was ... was Hudson your brother?”

For the first time, I see surprise in his eyes. “Who told you about Hudson?”

“Lia did. Last night when we were having tea. She mentioned that—“ I break off at the
fury in his eyes.

“What did she tell you?” he grinds out, and for the first time I feel a flash of fear.

“Just that her boyfriend died,” I finish in a rush. “She didn’t say anything about you at
all. I just took a guess that her boyfriend might be ...”

“My brother? Yeah, Hudson was my brother.” He takes a step back. “Don’t bother telling
me how *sorry* you are.” The words drip ice, in an effort—I think—to keep me from knowing
how much they hurt. But I’ve been there, have spent weeks doing the same thing and he doesn’t
fool me.

“About that ... I’ve been thinking, maybe you’re right.”

That startles a laugh out of him. Along with an appraising look that sends a whole
different kind of shivers down my spine. “About what?

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. And you’re right. When it comes to death
and other important things, *sorry*’s a pretty useless word.”

“Oh really?” Normally the smug words would get my back up but I figure he’s got the
right to gloat a little about this one. Even if he was a total jackass the last time we talked about
it.

“Yeah. Most of the time it doesn’t mean what it’s supposed to. It means, *I didn’t hear
you or God, I’m such a loser or God, you’re a loser or that really sucks*. The truth is, most of the
time the person saying it is anything *but* sorry. So what’s the point in repeating it at a time like
this? It’s way too pathetic a word to even touch the kind of grief you’re feeling.”

For long seconds, he doesn't say anything. Just tilts his head and watches me with those dark eyes that see so much and show so little. Finally, when I'm searching my brain for some way to take back what I just said, he asks, "What makes you think I'm grieving?"

"Aren't you?" I challenge.

More silence. Then, "I don't know."

"You don't ... what does that even mean?"

He shakes his head, takes another step back, then another and another. "I have to go."

"Wait. Just like that?"

He doesn't answer. Just turns and walks away so fast it's nearly a run.

I don't even bother trying to keep up. If I've learned anything in the last couple of days, it's that there's no catching Jaxon Montgomery if he doesn't want to be caught. Instead, I turn in the other direction and head back to the castle.

Now that I have a set destination in mind, the walk seems much faster than my original wandering did. But even though it goes quickly, I can't shake the uncomfortable feeling that I'm being watched. Which is absurd, considering Jaxon went in the other direction and Lia disappeared right after her argument with Jaxon.

Still, the feeling stays with me the whole time I'm outside. Something else is niggling at me too, something I can't quite figure out. ~~-all the way back to the castle, the feeling that he's watching me even when the path I'm on winds out of view of the gazebo. There's something else niggling at me too, but I can't quite figure out what it is.~~ At least not until I reach the warmth and safety of the castle—and my room. It's as I'm peeling off all the layers I'm wearing that it finally hits me.

Neither Lia nor ~~the guy she was with were~~ Jaxon were wearing a jacket.

Commented [SA96]: Great!!

Chapter Seventeen

ix

I spend the rest of the day alternating between thinking about Lia and that guy and doing my best not to think about them. Once Macy's out of class, I do a pretty good job of the latter—largely because she's all about sitting on my bed watching Supernatural and shoving junk food in our faces.

But once she goes to bed, everything comes back. I'm exhausted, but now that I'm not sick and jet lagged, it's impossible to sleep. All around me are unfamiliar howls and roars ... and even the occasional animalistic scream in the distance. It's enough to freak anyone out. Especially a girl born and raised in the city.

“Well then, why do I need to—“ I break off when I realize I'm talking to myself.

Beau

“You sure you’re up for this?” Macy asks as I grab a sweatshirt from my closet.

Is she kidding? “Not even a little bit.”

“That’s what I figured.” She heaves a huge sigh. “We could cancel if you want. Tell everyone you’re still not over the altitude sickness.”

“And have Flint think I’m chicken? No, thank you.” I actually couldn’t care less if Flint thinks I’m afraid or not. But Macy has been so excited about this stupid snowball fight all day that there’s no way I’m going to take it away from her. The fact that she offered to cancel because she knows I’m not into it, only makes me more determined to go. “We’re going to this snowball fight and we’re going to ...”

“Kick some butt?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of not making complete and total fools out of ourselves, but way to think positive.”

She laughs, as I intend her to, then bounds off the bed and starts layering up like crazy. Which ... finally, someone at this ridiculous school who has some sense. Between the jerks I met the first night and then Jaxon and Lia, I’m beginning to think everyone in this place has some bizarre immunity to cold. Like maybe they’re aliens and I’m the stupid human living among them.

After we both finish getting dressed in—I counted this time--six layers, she herds me toward the door. “Come on, we don’t want to be late or we’ll totally get ambushed.”

“Ambushed. With snowballs. Sounds fantastic.” San Diego has never looked so good.

“Just wait. You’re going to love it. Plus it’ll give you a chance to meet all of Flint’s friends.” She checks her make-up one more time in the mirror by the door, then all but shoves me into the hallway.

“All of Flint’s friends?” I ask as we make our way through the halls. “Exactly how many people are going to be at this thing?”

“I don’t know. At least a hundred.”

“A hundred people? At a snowball fight?”

“Maybe more. Probably more.”

“How does that even work?” I demand.

“Does it matter?” she answers, brows raised.

“Yes, it matters. I mean, how can you possibly keep track of that many people trying to throw things at you?”

“I don’t think you keep track of them so much as try to flatten everyone you come across without being flattened yourself.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe the altitude sickness is coming back.”

“Too late.” She links her arm through mine and starts tugging me along. “We’re almost there.”

“So, can you be a little more specific about who all is going to be there? Anyone I’ve already met—I mean, besides Flint?”

“I don’t know if Lia’s going to be there. Cam won’t—he and Flint don’t really get along.

It’s a ... thing.”

I think about asking exactly what kind of thing she’s referring to, but truth is, I don’t care if Lia shows up. Or Cam. There’s only one person I’m trying to find out about and since Macy isn’t getting there herself, I guess I really am going to have to ask.

“How about Jaxon?” I keep my voice light even though my heart is pounding at the mere mention of his name. “Is he going to be there?”

“Jaxon who?” she asks, absently waving at a couple of people as we pass one of the open study rooms. Because apparently my cousin is a moron.

“There’s more than one?”

“Sure. Four or five, I think. Who are you talking about?”

The only one who matters, I’m guessing. —“So, do you know Jaxon?”

She pauses in tying my tie, her eyes going wide. “Jaxon Montgomery?”

“I don’t know his last name. How many Jaxons go to school here?” Jaxon Vega.”

“Jaxon Vega?” Sure enough, by the time she gets to the second syllable of Jaxon’s name, her voice is little more than a squeak.

“He is the one we saw in the hall that first day, right?”

“Only one that matters. How do you know Jaxon Montgomery?” She sounds as wary as she does incredulous.

“I don’t know that I do. If there’s more than one Jaxon —“

“Really tall, really gorgeous, black hair, black eyes, black clothes, and a smoking hot body?”

~~“Okay, then. Yeeah. Jaxon Montgomery.” I turn her words over in my head a couple of times and I’ve got to admit, it’s a pretty good description, even if it doesn’t take into account a lot of the things that make him so gorgeous. Like his jaw and his lips and the way his eyes change with his emotions. Not to mention that insanely sexy voice.~~

~~“Yeah. Umm ... yeah.” Macy gives up any pretense of tying my tie chill—and of walking, as it turns out. Instead, she turns to me, hands on her hips, and demands, “and instead rests her hands on her hips.” “Why are you asking about Jaxon?”~~

~~“I don’t know. We met a couple of times and I just wondered if he was into snowball fights.”~~

~~“You’ve met a couple of times? How exactly did you meet, considering I’ve been with you almost all of the time since you got here?”~~

~~So, again, how do you know Jaxon? I know it’s not from the party because you left right after he arrived. We both did.”~~

~~“I don’t know, just walking around the school. It’s only a few times.”~~

~~“A few times?” Her eyes almost bug out of her head. “That’s more than a couple. Where? When? How?”~~

~~“Why are you being so weird about this?” I’m seriously beginning to regret bringing Jaxon up. I mean, she was freaked out over Flint, but it was a fun kind of freaked out. Right now, it looks more like she’s going to blow a gasket. “He was in the hallway, I was in the hallway. It just kind of happened.”~~

~~“Things don’t just happen with Jaxon. He’s not exactly known for being talkative with anyone outside of—” She stops abruptly.~~

~~“Outside of whom?” I prompt.~~

“I don’t know. Just . . .”

“Just?”

She smiles a little sickly but doesn’t say anything else and it pisses me off. Like seriously, pisses me off. “Why do you keep doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“You start sentences and then never finish them. Or you start to say something and halfway through change what you were saying to something else entirely?”

“I don’t—“

“You do. All the time. And, honestly, it’s beginning to feel a little weird. Like there’s some kind of secret I’m not supposed to know. What’s going on?”

“That’s ridiculous, Grace.” She looks at me like I’m crazy. “Katsmere is just, you know, full of all kinds of weird cliques and social rules. I didn’t want to bore you with them all.”

“Because you’d rather I commit social suicide?” I arch my brows at her.

“Of course not! You know I want you to be happy here.”

“Then prove it. What were you going to say about Jaxon before you cut yourself off?”

She doesn’t answer for long seconds. Finally, when I’m about to ask again, she says “I was going to say he’s not very friendly with people who aren’t in the Order.”

“The Order? What’s that?”

“-met him last night,” I tell her, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible. “I couldn’t sleep, so I went for a walk around the school. Thought I’d work off my nervous energy and see if I could find my way around for today.”

“It’s nothing.” “Why didn’t you wake me up? You know I would have been happy to go with you.” She doesn’t sound happy to go with me. In fact, her voice currently sounds like a dying cat-- as its being strangled. “So you ran into Jaxon on your walk?”

When I keep looking at her, silently pushing her to continue, she adds, “It’s just a nickname we gave the most popular guys at school because they’re always together.”

I think about the guys he walked into the party with, and the ones who were with him in the hall when Flint was carrying me to my room. At the time, I remember thinking that Jaxon looked like the leader, but I didn’t think much of it. I was too busy trying not to stare at him.

Based on my recollections, Macy’s explanation is reasonable. Still there’s something about the way she says it—and the way she’s looking everywhere but in my eyes-- that makes me think there’s more to the story than she’s letting on.

Still, standing in the middle of the hallway doesn’t seem the best place to keep pushing at her-- especially since we really are going to be late if we don’t get moving.

With that in mind, I start walking and Macy does too, but she sticks close to my side. I give her a weird look, wondering what’ she’s up to, at least until she asks in a kind of stage whisper, “Have you met the others, too?”

“The other members of the Order?” I feel a little ridiculous just saying the name out loud. I mean, they’re twelfth grade students at a boarding school, not running a monastery in Tibet. “No. I’ve only met Jaxon.”

“Only ... you mean he was alone?” Now she doesn’t just look worried, She looks downright sick.

“Yeah. So?”

I think about telling her the whole story, see if she thinks I should report Marc and Jace to my uncle or someone else in the administration. The last thing I want to do is paint a bright red X on myself on my first day of classes, especially since nothing actually happened. But I don't want them to think they can treat girls like that, either. And I definitely don't want them to single out the next new girl to harass like that.

Jaxon said he would handle it, though, and my gut says I can trust him. Still, I would like to know what Macy thinks of him ... and if she believes I can trust him to keep his word.

"Oh God!," she says, sounding sick when I don't answer right away. "What did he do? Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"Jaxon?" I can't keep the surprise from my voice.

"Of course, Yes, Jaxon! That is who we were talking about, right?"

"No, he didn't hurt me. Why would you even think he would?"

"Because he's Jaxon. That's what he does!"

"He was ..." I shake my head, try to think of the right word to describe our interactions. Then go with generic because I figure Macy won't get it anyway. "Most of the time he was Jaxon didn't hurt me. He was kind of... nice."

She "I'm sorry, what?"

"He was nice." I clearly enunciate each word.

She looks at me like I just said I wanted to body surf the Alaskan tundra.

"Okay, now I'm confused. Did you really just call Jaxon Montgomery nice? Are you sure we're talking about the same Jaxon?" She pulls me into the nearest alcove, then She sits down on my bed, motions for me to do the same. Then grabs my hands and squeezes them tightly.

“Really tall, really gorgeous, really scary, black hair, black eyes, black clothes, and a smoking hot body?”

I’ve got to admit, it’s a pretty good description—especially the really gorgeous part, even if it doesn’t take into account a lot of the things that make him so attractive. Like his jaw and his lips and that insanely hot voice. Not to mention the thin scar that turns him from merely pretty to sexy af. And also scary af.

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“You know you don’t have to lie, right? It’s okay? You can tell me what happened. I swear, Grace. You can tell me the truth. I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to.”

“Tell me. You won’t tell anyone what?” I’m thoroughly confused now. Because while it might have been a stretch to call Jaxon nice, I can’t imagine why it’s eliciting this kind of response from my cousin.

“What he did to you.” She starts looking me over, like she’s looking for something. She’s searching for some proof that Jaxon attacked me or something.

“He didn’t *do* anything, Macy.” A little impatient now, I pull my hands from hers. “I mean, He was really kind to me, actually.”

“Jaxon Montgomery was *kind* to you?” The strangled voice is back.

“I mean, he wasn’t Gandhi, or anything.. But yeah, he helped me out when I needed it and he sure as hell didn’t hurt me. ~~really did help me.~~ Why is that so hard to believe?”

“Because Jaxon Montgomery Vega isn’t nice ~~kind~~ to anyone. Or helpful. Ever.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Well, you should.” She looks at me like I’m stupid. “Well, you should.” “Because he’s dangerous, Grace. *Very* dangerous, and you should stay as far away from him as you possibly can.”

I start to say tell her that he’s not the dangerous one, but then I remember the way Marc and Quinn ~~Jaee~~ fell right into line the second he showed up. -It was hard to miss the fear on their faces, and not just because he’d sent them flying across the room.

Now that I think back on it, they’d been scared of him. Like really scared, and not just because ~~they’d been~~ he’d called them out for hassling me.

“So what did he say to you?” Macy asks, and though her voice has calmed down she still sounds agitated.

“Not much, really.”

“Well, then, how was he kind? Because, honestly Grace “I’m serious. You need to be careful of him. I, if he really was nice to you, it’s only because he wants something. And even then I’m not so sure that seems strange, because usually Jaxon takes what he wants. Or, more likely, has one of his minions do it for him. Always has, always will.”

I’ve been here three days and even I know that’s not true. Which is probably why I say, “Jaxon’s the one who kept Marc and Quinn from throwing me out in the snow, Macy. I don’t think he did it because he wanted something from me.”

“Wait. *He*’s the one?”

“Yes, he is. Why would he do that if he’s such a bad guy?”

“I don’t know.” She look stunned. “But just because he helped you once doesn’t mean he’ll do it again. So be careful with him, okay?”

“He’s not the one who tried to kill me.”

Commented [SA97]: This confused us a little, since didn’t the original synopsis say that she was brought to the school in part to tempt Jaxon into feeling/distracting him from the vampire war? Is that still the goal? It would put them together a lot more on the page.

Commented [ep98]: Agree. I feel like someone should lock them in a room or something. Like the teacher sends one of them to the infirmary or something after one of the kids in chemistry class spills something on them and then they get locked in there “by accident”. That scene could go above where I suggested we needed another scene.

She snorts. “Yeah, well, you’ve only been here a few days. Give it time.”

“That’s ...” For long seconds, I trip over my tongue as I try to find a comeback that will show her how absurd she sounds. But in the end I can’t get past the annoyance her words cause and end up saying exactly what I’m thinking. “A really awful thing to say.”

“Just because it’s awful doesn’t make it any less true.” She gives me a no-nonsense look that seems incongruous with her normally effervescent personality. “You need to trust me on this.”

“Macy ...”

“I’m serious. Don’t worry about me being too harsh.” I think about telling Macy the whole story—about how Jaxon rescued me from Marc and Jace—but she’s already worked up enough. The last thing I want is to freak her out any more. Also, I’m curious about what she means by his minions and if I get her on the subject of what really happened last night, I’m pretty sure I won’t get any more information about Jaxon. Ever. And I want more information.

“What do you mean by minions?” I decide to start with the most confusing part of what she said.

“You must have seen them,” she answers. “Weren’t they with him last night?”

“He was alone.”

Now she just looks flummoxed, eyes wide and mouth hanging open. “But Jaxon’s never alone.”

“He was last night. Or at least, I think he was.” I didn’t see anyone else in the foyer, but then I wasn’t really looking, either. First because I was fighting off Marc and Jace and then because I was completely focused on Jaxon.

“You must have been mistaken. Maybe you missed them, but I guarantee you at least a few of Jaxon’s crew were there, too. They travel in packs.”

“They?”

She just shakes her head, narrows her eyes at me in obvious warning. “Don’t worry about it. And don’t worry about Jaxon Montgomery Vega. Unless it’s figuring you’re trying to figure out how to stay as far away from him as possible.”

Commented [SA99]: Same query as earlier.

Behind her, something catches my eye and my mouth goes dry. “Yeah, well, that might be a problem.” I barely manage to get the words out past my suddenly tight throat.

“And why is that exactly?”

“Because I’m not going anywhere.” Jaxon’s low, amused voice cuts through my cousin’s umbrage, has her eyes going wide and her skin turning pale. “And neither is Grace.”

Chapter Eighteen

Macy squeaks—she actually squeaks—but Jaxon just grins at me, a wicked, wild thing that has my breath catching and my heart beating like a metronome on high.

At least until Macy pinches my hand and hisses, “Seriously? You couldn’t tell me he was there?”

“I didn’t—“

“She didn’t know.” He looks me over from top to bottom and for a second—just a second—his smile reaches the depths of those obsidian eyes of his. “Braving the snow twice in one day? I’ve got to admit I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be too impressed. I still have to make it through the snowball fight in one piece.”

The smile drops—from his face and his eyes—as quickly as it came. “You’re playing Flint’s game?”

It sounds more like an accusation than a question, though I don’t know why. “Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“For a snowball fight?” He shakes his head. “Not so much.”

“Oh, well ...” That got awkward fast. “Umm. We should probably ...“

“Get going,” Macy finishes, tugging on my arm. “We don’t want to be late.”

“You could join us,” I tell him, refusing to be pulled away before I’m ready. “It’ll be fun. And I’m sure Flint won’t mind.”

“You’re sure he won’t mind.” Once again, it’s not a question, though Jaxon is back to looking amused, as long as you don’t look too closely at his eyes. They’re flat now, completely

empty in a way I haven't seen since he looked through me at the party. "Because I've got to say, I'm pretty sure he will."

"I don't know what you mean." I turn to look at Macy, who has gone from pale to absolutely sheet white.

And that's before Flint walks up behind me and puts his hands on my shoulders. "Hey, Grace. Looks like you're ready to get your snowball on."

"I am, actually." I turn and end up grinning at him because it's impossible not to. He's just that fun *and* that charming. Not to mention the fact that he's wearing a snow hat in the shape of a fire breathing dragon that looks absolutely ridiculous. "In fact, I was trying to talk Jaxon into joining us."

"Really?" Flint's eyes go indigo blue as he looks from me to Jaxon. "What do you say, Vega? Want to fight?"

He's smiling, but even I can tell it's not a friendly invitation ... and that's before three other guys join us, arranging themselves in a semi-circle right behind Jaxon. For the first time, the phrase "got your back" makes sense to me, because it's very obvious that's why these guys are here. To have Jaxon's back. I just don't know from what.

These must be members of the infamous Order Macy was telling me about. And I can see why they got the nickname—there's a closeness between the four of these guys that even I can't miss. A bond that seems to be about a lot more than simple friendship.

Flint feels it, too. I can tell by the way he stiffens, and the way he shifts his weight forward, onto his toes, like he's just waiting for Jaxon to throw the first punch. More, like he's hoping for it.

Which ... no. Just, no. I don't care if there's suddenly enough testosterone in our little alcove to start the next world war, it's not going to happen. At least not while Macy and I are standing directly in the middle.

"Come on." I grab my cousin's arm. "Let's go figure out a way to win **this** snowball fight."

Commented [WU100]: Note to Self: This needs to be sharper, funnier.

That gets both Jaxon's and Flint's attention. "Those are big words coming from someone who never saw snow before she got here three days ago," Flint teases, and while the tension isn't gone, it's way lower than it was a few seconds ago—exactly as I intended.

"Yeah, well, you know me. All about the bravado." I keep a firm grip on Macy's arm as I start to maneuver around Jaxon and his friends.

"Don't you mean, all about **the** ..." Jaxon murmurs in my ear as I slide past him. His breath is hot against my ear, the side of my neck, and a shiver that has nothing to do with the cold works its way down my spine.

Commented [WU101]: All about the what?????

Our eyes meet and for a second, just a second, the whole world seems to drop away. Macy, Flint, the other students who are laughing and chattering as they move past us on their way to the door all disappear until it's just Jaxon and me and the electricity that arcs between us.

My breath catches in my throat, my whole body grows warm and it takes real, physical effort to stop myself from reaching out and touching him.

I think he must be having the same problem, because his hand comes up, hovers in the air between us for one long, infinite moment.

"Grace." It's barely a whisper, but still I feel it all the way inside myself. I wait, breath held, for him to say something—anything—else, but before he can, one of the people rushing by knocks him from behind.

It breaks the spell and suddenly we're just two people standing in a crowded hallway again. Disappointment wells inside of me, especially when Jaxon takes a step back, his face set once again in inscrutable lines.

I wait for him to say something—anything—but he doesn't. Instead, he just watches as Flint herds Macy and me toward the open door. As we cross the threshold, I raise my hand in a small good-bye wave.

I don't expect him to return it—and he doesn't—but just as I turn away to take my first step outside, he says, "Don't forget to build an arsenal."

They're pretty much the last words I expect to hear from him ... or anyone, for that matter. "An arsenal?"

"It's the most important part of winning a snowball fight. Find a base you can protect and concentrate on building up your arsenal. Only attack when you're sure you have enough ammunition to win."

Snowballs. Here I was, convinced we had just shared a moment and he's thinking about snowballs. Fantastic.

"Ummm .. thanks for the advice?" I give him a wtf look.

Jaxon gives me the same old blank face in response, but I swear his eyes are sparkling just a little. "It's good advice. You should take it."

"Why don't *you* take it? Join us and help me build a bigger arsenal."

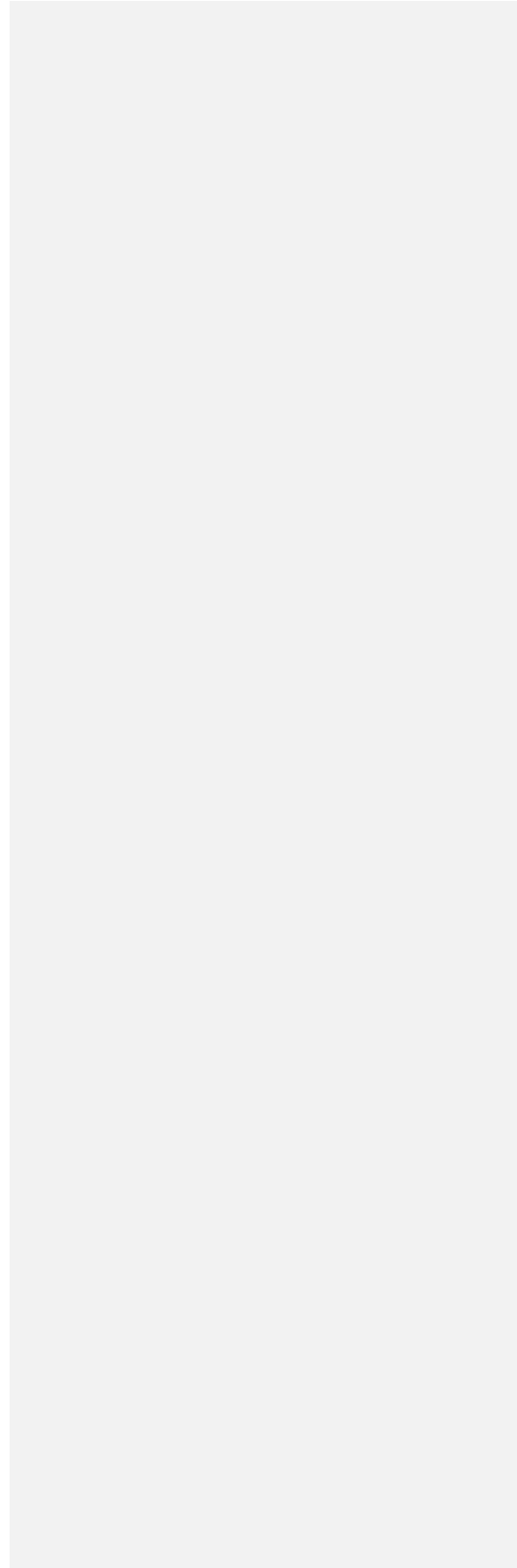
He lifts a brow. "And here I thought that's exactly what I have been doing."

"What does *that* mean?" I demand.

But he's already turning away, already *walking* away, and I'm left staring after him.

As usual.

Damn it.



Chapter Nineteen

“Jaxon Vega, huh?” Flint asks as the cold slaps me in the face for the second time today.

“Don’t start,” I say, giving him the side eye.

“I’m not,” he answers, holding both hands up in mock surrender. “I swear.” He’s silent for a minute or so as the three of us concentrate on trudging through the snow toward everyone else. And can I just say that I’m pretty sure Macy undersold the crowd when she said a hundred people. Even in the weird civil twilight that surrounds us on all sides, it looks more like a hundred and fifty, maybe even two hundred.

On the plus side, at least they’re all wearing hats and scarves and coats ... which I’m taking to mean that not everyone in this place is an actual alien. Thankfully.

“I just didn’t know screwed up and obnoxious was your type, that’s all.”

I shoot him a glare. “I thought you weren’t starting.”

“I’m not. I’m just looking out for you. Jaxon is—“

“*Not* screwed up.”

He laughs. “I notice you didn’t even try to say he wasn’t obnoxious though, did you? And no offense, Grace, but you’re new here. You have no idea just how screwed up he is.”

“And you do?”

“Yeah. And so does Macy. Right, Mace?”

Macy doesn't answer, just keeps walking and pretends like she doesn't hear him. I'm beginning to wish I could do the same.

"All right, all right, I get it." Flint shakes his head. "I won't say anything else against the Chosen One. Except tell you to be careful."

"We're just friends, Flint."

"Yeah, well, take it from someone who knows. Jaxon doesn't have friends."

I want to ask him what he means by that considering Jaxon's got the Order and they seem pretty damn close to me, but we've reached the first row of trees, where the others are gathered. Plus, I'm the one who just said I didn't want to talk about Jaxon. If I start asking questions about him, that gives Flint carte blanche to say whatever he wants and that doesn't seem fair since Jaxon isn't around to defend himself.

Flint walks into the middle of the group like he owns the place. Then again, judging from the way the others respond to him, maybe he does. It's not that they all come to attention, necessarily. It's just obvious that they all really want him to notice them ... and they all really do want to hear what he has to say.

I can't help wondering what that kind of popularity is like. I don't want it—would probably melt under the pressure of it in less than twenty-four hours. But I do wonder what it feels like. And how Flint feels about it.

I don't have long to dwell on my thoughts, though, because Flint gets started giving a quick rundown of the rules—one that sounds an awful lot like *there are no rules*, except the one that says if you get hit by five snowballs you're out—and then disperses the crowd. As the five minute countdown starts, he grabs Macy's and my hands and starts running with us toward a large thicket of evergreen and aspen trees several hundred yards away.

“We’ve got two minutes to find a good spot,” he says. “Another two and a half to get things together. Then it’s open season.”

“But if everyone finds a spot, who will we have to throw sno—“

“They won’t,” Flint and Macy interrupt me at the exact same time.

“Don’t worry,” Flint tells me as we finally reach the trees. “There will be plenty of people to wage war on.”

Wage war? I can barely breathe. It’s a combination of the high altitude and cold air, I know, but I can’t help feeling self-conscious about the way I’m huffing and puffing. Especially since he and Macy both sound like they just finished a leisurely garden stroll.

“So what do we do now?” I ask, even though it’s fairly obvious considering Flint is already scooping up snow and making it into balls.

“Build up our arsenal.” He gives me a wicked grin. “Just because I think Jaxon is dangerous, doesn’t mean the guy doesn’t know strategy.”

We spend the next several minutes making as many snowballs as we possibly can. I half-expect Macy and Flint to outpace me here, too, but it turns out all those years of making pastries—and patting dough into balls-- with my mother paid off, because I am an *excellent* snowball maker. Totally kickass. And I’m twice as fast as they are.

“Coming up on five minutes,” Macy says, her phone ringing with a fifteen second warning.

“Move, move, move,” Flint calls out, even as he grabs my wrist and drags me behind the closest tree.

Just in time, too, because as soon as Macy’s phone screeches out the five minute mark, all hell breaks loose. Literally.

People drop from the trees all around us, snowballs flying fast and furious in every direction. Others run by at breakneck speeds, lobbing them kamikaze style at anyone within range.

One snowball whizzes right past my ear and I breathe a sigh of relief until another one slams into my side—even with the tree, and Flint, for cover.

“That’s one,” I hiss, jerking to the right to avoid another snowball flying straight at me. It hits Flint in the shoulder instead and he mutters a low curse.

“Are we going to hide back here all day?” Macy demands from where she’s crouched at the base of a nearby tree. “Or are we going to get in this thing?”

“By all means,” Flint says, gesturing for her to go first.

She rolls her eyes at him, but it only takes her a few seconds to scoop snow into a couple of giant snowballs. Then she’s pushing off and running straight for our arsenal, letting her snowballs fly with a giant war whoop that practically shakes the snow off nearby branches.

I follow her into the fray, a snowball clutched in my gloved hands as I wait for a perfect opportunity to use it.

The opportunity presents itself when a large guy comes barreling toward me, snowballs hidden in the bottom of the jacket he’s turned into a carrying pouch. He sends them flying at me, one after another, but I manage to dodge them all. Then I throw my snowball as hard as I can, straight at him. It hits him in his very surprised face.

We’ve built up about a hundred snowballs in our arsenal and we use them all as more and more people pour through the forest, looking for a place to hide as they catch their breaths and try to make a few extra snowballs of their own.

It's total guerilla warfare—fast and brutal and winner takes all. It's also the most fun I've had since my parents died, and probably even longer than that. We exhaust our supply pretty quickly and then we're just like everyone else, running through the trees trying to find cover as we fling snowballs at whoever's within reach.

I laugh like a crazy person the whole time. Macy and Flint look bemused at first, but soon they're laughing with me—especially when one or the other of us gets hit.

It's after an ambush that leads to Macy getting her fourth hit and Flint and me getting our third ones, that we decide to get serious. We find the biggest two trees we can to hide behind, and drop to our knees, packing snowballs as quickly as possible. After we've got about thirty made, Flint yanks off his hat and scarf and starts piling them inside .

"What are you doing?" I demand. "You're going to freeze to death out here."

"I'm fine," he tells me, as he turns his scarf into a kind of carrying pack. "This is our chance to win."

"How?" I ask. There's chaos all around us and though the others haven't found our hiding spot yet, it's only a matter of time—probably a minute or two—before they do. And while we've got ammunition, there's also a lot fewer of us than there is of them.

"By climbing the trees," Macy tells me.

Before I can express my utter incredulity at the thought of climbing one of the gigantic, leafless aspens—the lowest branches are over fifteen feet off the ground—she runs straight at the trunk of the closest tree. She jumps, and kicks out hard enough to send herself soaring up several feet at an angle, arms extended, to grab the branch of a neighboring tree. She hangs there for a few seconds, swinging back and forth to gain momentum, then thrusts herself up and onto a nearby branch.

The whole thing takes about ten seconds.

“Did she just do parkour against that tree?” I ask Flint before turning to Macy. “Did you just parkour that tree?”

“I did,” she says with a laugh, then reaches down to catch the hat full of snowballs Flint sends flying her way.

“That’s freaking awesome. But if you guys expect me to be able to do that, I think we’re all going to be disappointed.”

“Don’t worry, Grace,” Flint tells me as he thrusts his snowball packed scarf into my arms. “Just hold onto these for me, will you?”

“Of course. What are you going to—“ I let out a screech as he grabs onto me and throws me over his shoulder.

“Quiet down or you’re going to give away our hiding place,” he says as he starts climbing the tree like some Alaskan version of Spiderman, hands and feet practically sticking to the tree’s bark as he carries me up the gigantic trunk. “And don’t drop the snowballs.”

“You should have thought of that before you decided to hang me upside down,” I snark at him. But I tighten my grip on the stupid scarf.

I don’t know how he’s doing it and I wouldn’t believe it if I wasn’t witnessing—or should I say experiencing—it for myself. But thirty seconds later, I’m straddling a tree branch, snowballs in hand as I wait to ambush the first people who come by.

Flint’s on a branch several feet above mine. It’s high enough off the ground to make me whimper just looking up at him, but he’s standing there with a huge grin on his face, like balancing on a snow packed tree branch is the easiest thing in the world.

Which—to be clear—it definitely is not. And I know that because I’m *sitting* on one and I still feel like I could slip off any second.

“Someone’s coming!” Macy hisses from one tree over.

I glance down at the ground and realize she’s right—a group of four guys is heading our way. They’re moving stealthily instead of quickly, almost like they know we’re here. And maybe they do—it’s not like I was exactly quiet while Flint hauled me up this stupid tree.

Either way it doesn’t matter, because all we need is for them to get a few steps closer and—

Bam. Flint sends a snowball soaring straight into the leader’s chest. Macy follows up with a one, two shot to the guy in the back. Which leaves the two middle ones for me.

I send a volley of snowballs straight at them, one after another. I hit one guy twice and the other three times, which—if their curse-laden complaints are anything to go by—knocks them completely out of the game.

Flint is all but crowing in triumph as he dispatches a second group that made the mistake of coming this way, and Macy takes care of couple of loners trying to sneak in from behind us. I restock from the thick snow on the branches and wait for whoever comes next.

Turns out it’s a couple of girls dressed in teal and navy outerwear, who look like they’re having about as much fun as I do at the dentist... which is to say, none at all.

I think about pulling my punches—no reason to make them even more miserable—but I figure it’s only putting off the inevitable. The faster I knock them out of the game, the faster they can head back to the castle. And the faster we can win this thing.

I reach for my last three snowballs and am just waiting for them to come within range when a powerful wind comes up and knocks me off balance. I make a grab for the tree trunk, and manage to hold on while the wind shakes the whole tree.

Flint curses and makes a grab for the trunk, too. Then calls to me, “Hold on, Grace! I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Just hold on,” I call back. “I’m fine.”

Then I turn to look for Macy, worried my cousin might be in worse shape than me. But just as I turn my head to look behind me, another gust of wind hits the tree, hard. It’s an eerie sound, and as the trunk starts to sway under the wind’s assault, I get more nervous. Especially when another gust comes through and hits me hard enough to threaten my grip on the tree.

Above me, Flint curses again. Then yells, “I’m coming. Just hold on another few seconds.”

“Wait!” I shout back to be heard over the wind, “Don’t!”

But then Macy screams and I whirl around, terrified I’m going to see her plunging to her death. And that’s when the worst gust of wind yet hits and I lose my grip on the tree completely.

I scramble to grab onto something—anything—but the wind is too strong. The branch I’m sitting on issues an ominous crack. And then I’m falling.

Chapter Twenty

For one second I have perfect clarity—I can hear Macy screaming, Flint calling my name, the wind roaring like a freight train—and then it’s all drowned out in the panicked beat of my heart as terror races through me.

I brace myself for bone-crunching impact, but before I hit Flint is grabbing me, pulling me against him, spinning us mid-air. He hits the ground, back first, and I land on him, my face buried in the curve of his neck.

We hit hard enough that the breath is knocked out of me. For one second, two, three, I can’t do anything but lay there on top of him, trying desperately to drag a breath into my abused lungs.

Flint’s not moving either and panic is a wild animal inside of me as I struggle into a sitting position. His eyes are closed and I’m terrified that he’s hurt—or worse. He took the brunt of the fall, deliberately spinning us so that he slammed into the hard, snow-packed ground while all I slammed into was him.

It’s as I push up into a sitting position—knees on either side of his thighs—that I finally manage to pull in a huge gulp of air. It’s also at that moment that all hell breaks loose.

Macy is screaming my name as she scrambles down her tree and people swarm us from all directions. I’m too busy shaking Flint and slapping at his cheeks—trying to get him to respond—to pay any attention to what anyone else is doing.

At least until he opens his eyes and drawls, “I’m beginning to think I should have let you fall.”

“Oh my God! You’re okay!” I scramble off of him. “Are you okay?”

“I think so.” He pushes into a sitting position with a little groan. “You’re heavier than you look.”

“You shouldn’t move!” I try to shove him back down, but he just laughs.

“The snow broke my fall, Grace. I’m good.” To prove it, he jackknifes to his feet in one lithe movement.

It’s as he stands up that I realize he’s telling the truth. There’s a Flint shaped indentation in the snow from where he hit. For the first time since moving to this state, I’m grateful for its ridiculous climate. After all, when you’re falling twenty feet, snow is so much softer than ground.

Still, if that’s the case... “Why did you jump after me? It was a stupid thing to do. You could have been hurt.”

He doesn’t answer, just kind of stands there watching me, a weird look in his eyes. It’s not concern or annoyance or pride or any of the other expressions I’d expect him to be wearing right now. Instead, it looks an awful lot like ... shame.

But that doesn’t make sense. He just saved me from a concussion or a couple broken bones—at least. What does he have to be ashamed of?

“What was the alternative?” Macy demands, voice shaking like she just got back the power of speech. “Let you be hurt?”

“You mean it’s better for Flint to get hurt?” I shoot back.

“But he didn’t, did he? And neither did you.” She turns to him with a grateful look.

“Thank you so much, Flint.”

Her words make me realize that I’ve been too busy worrying about—and yelling at—Flint to do what I should have right away. “Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

The words sound awkward after all my admonishments, but they are nothing compared to the look on Flint’s face as he stares over my shoulder into the crowd. It alternates between looking like he’s going to throw a punch, to looking like he’s dying to run away.

I figure it’s because he’s bad with gratitude—I’m terrible with it, so I get that—but as the talking in the crowd dies down and people start parting like a human Red Sea, I turn to see what’s happening.

And nearly wither on the spot at the coldness in Jaxon’s eyes. Only the fact that it’s directed at Flint and not me keeps my knees from giving way completely. Because I only thought he was intimidating at the welcome party.

Right now, the look on his face is absolutely terrifying. And the five inscrutable guys at his back—the whole of the infamous Order, I assume—only reinforce the fact that there’s a problem.

A big problem.

I just wish I knew why.

Even Flint, who has never reacted to Jaxon before, turns a little pale. And that’s before Jaxon says—in the coldest, most reasonable voice imaginable—asks him, “What the hell did you think you were doing?”

It’s the tone even more than the look that has me moving, a frisson of fear working its way down my spine as I position myself between him and Flint before an all out brawl can take

place. I may not understand all the nuances of what's happening here, but it's obvious that Jaxon is livid—and more than ready to take it out on Flint. Which makes no sense considering, “I fell, Jaxon. Flint saved me.”

For the first time, he turns those cold eyes on me. “Did he?”

“Yes! The wind kicked up and I lost my balance. I fell out of the tree and Flint jumped after me.” I shoot Flint a look, telling him to back me up, but he's not looking at me.

He's not looking at Jaxon, either. Instead, he's staring off into the distance, jaw and fists clenched.

“What's wrong?” I ask, reaching out to touch his shoulder. “Are you hurt, after all?”

A fine tremor runs through the earth, a tiny little earthquake that rattles the tree branches a little but doesn't do anything else. It's the third one I've felt since I've been in Alaska, so it doesn't surprise me when no one reacts. Even I don't get too excited. In San Diego, we'd have one or two of these tiny ones every couple of months.

Flint doesn't even noticed. He's too busy shrugging off my hand. “I'm fine, Grace.”

“Then what's wrong?” I look back and forth between him and Jaxon. “I don't understand what's happening here.”

Neither of them answers me, so I look to Macy for an explanation beyond my working hypothesis that Alaska turns people *insane*. But she looks as confused as I do—and about a hundred times more terrified.

As for everybody else ... they're riveted by the drama, eyes glued to Jaxon as he continues to watch Flint who continues to very obviously not watch him back. It's not the first time I've thought of Jaxon as a hunter, but it is the first time I've thought of Flint as prey.

Suddenly Macy snaps out of whatever stupor she's been in and grabs my arm. "We should go back to the room. Make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine," I tell her, completely exasperated. Like I'm going to leave Jaxon out here when he looks like he wants to rip Flint's throat out just for breathing. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Actually, that's the best idea I've heard." Jaxon takes a step closer, until he's right behind me. He doesn't touch me, but he's close enough that that doesn't matter. I can feel him. "I'll walk you back to your room."

The crowd recoils at this. Like I actually see people drawing back, eyes wide, mouths open, faces slack with shock. I can't figure out what the big deal is unless it's a showdown between the two most popular guys at school. But it's not even a showdown, not with the way Flint's taken himself out of the whole thing.

It's that uncharacteristic behavior more than any other that has me stepping away from Jaxon and saying, "I need to stay with Flint. Make sure he's really—"

"I'm fine, Grace," Flint grates out from between clenched teeth. "Just go with Jaxon."

"Are you sure?" I reach out a hand to touch his shoulder, but suddenly Jaxon's there between us, preventing my hand from landing. Then he's stepping forward, moving me slowly, inexorably, away from Flint and back toward school.

It's the craziest thing I've ever seen. Definitely the craziest thing I've ever been a part of.

And still, I let it happen. Because this is Jaxon.

"Come on, Macy," I say quietly to my cousin who is still clutching my arm. "Let's go."

She nods and then we're walking back toward the castle—Macy, Jaxon and me. I half expect the other members of the Order to join us, but a quick glance behind me shows that they aren't moving.

No one is.

And can I just say, I'm beginning to feel an awful lot like Alice in Wonderland here—things keep getting “curiouser and curiouser.” Maybe that last plane ride with Philip was really a trip down the rabbit hole.

We walk in silence for a minute or two and with each step I'm beginning to realize maybe I didn't escape from the fall unscathed after all. Now that the adrenaline was worn off, my right ankle is hurting. A lot.

To keep my mind off the pain—and to keep Jaxon and Macy from noticing that I'm limping—I ask, “What are you doing out here, anyway? I thought you weren't going to join the snowball fight.”

“Good thing I was out here, considering the mess Flint got you into.” Jaxon doesn't so much as glance my way.

“It's no big deal,” I tell him, despite the fact that my ankle is working its way up from painful to excruciating pretty quickly now. “Flint had me. He—“

“Flint very definitely did not have you,” he snaps, turning to face me for the first time. “In fact—“ He stops, eyes narrowing. “What's wrong?”

“Besides not being able to figure out why you're so mad?”

He shrugs off the question as he looks me over from head to toe. “What's hurting you?”

“I'm fine—“

“You're hurt, Grace?” Macy joins the conversation for the first time. The chicken.

“It’s nothing.” We’ve got a head start, but if we stop, the others are sure to catch up with us and the last thing I need right now is to make an even bigger spectacle of myself. So much for fitting in ... or even, blending in. After tonight, I might as well be painted biohazard orange.

It’s just like San Diego all over again. There, I was the girl whose parents had died. Here, I’m the girl who fell out of a tree and nearly caused World War III between the two hottest guys in school.

FML.

Determined to make it back to school—and my room—before the others, I start walking again. Or, should I say, try to start walking again because I don’t get very far before Jaxon is blocking my path.

“What hurts?” he asks again, and the look on his face tells me he’s not going to let it go.

And since arguing with him wastes precious seconds, I finally give in. “My ankle. I must have twisted it when we hit the ground.

Jaxon’s kneeling at my feet before I finish, gently probing at my ankle through my boot.

“I can’t take this off out here or you’ll get frostbite. But does it hurt when I do this?”

My gasp is the only answer he needs.

“Should I run ahead and get the snowmobile?” Macy asks. “I can be back before too long.”

“I can walk. Honest. I’m okay.”

Jaxon shoots both of us an incredulous look as he helps me to my feet. Then—without a word-- he swoops me into his arms.

Chapter Twenty-One

For long seconds, I can't move. I can't think. I can only stare up at him in a kind of open-mouthed shock as my brain short circuits. Because I'm not actually in Jaxon's arms, right? I mean, I can't be.

Except I am. And they feel really good around me. Really good. Plus, being in his arms—bride style—gives me an up close and personal view of his face. And can I just say how unfair it is that he's even hotter from an inch away? And he smells amazing, too.

His smell—like oranges and bergamot—is what pushes me over the edge, what has me struggling against him like a madwoman in my effort to be put back down. Because if he carries me all the way to school looking and smelling and feeling like he does, I'm going to be a total, incoherent mess.

"Can you please stop wiggling around so much?" he demands as I attempt to jackknife out of his arms.

"Just let me down, then. You can't carry me all the way back to school!"

There isn't so much as a hitch in his stride. "Watch me."

"Jaxon, be reasonable. It's a long walk."

"What's your point?"

I squirm around some more, trying to force him to put me down, but that just makes him tighten his hold.

"My point is I'm too heavy."

Again with the incredulous look.

“I’m serious.” I put my hands on his chest and use real effort to push. His arms don’t budge from around me. “Put me down before you hurt yourself.”

“Hurt myself?” The eyebrow arch I spent way too much time thinking about last night is back. “Are you trying to insult me?”

“I’m trying to get you to let go of me. You can’t carry me all the way back to—“

“Grace?” he interrupts.

I wait for him to say something, but when he doesn’t, I answer, “What?” in what could, perhaps, be described as not the nicest tone.

“Shut up.”

Part of me is super insulted at his words—and the matter-of-fact way he says them, but the part of me that’s actually in control of my tongue does exactly what he asks and shuts up. I mean, I suppose there are worse things in the world than being carried by a super sexy guy instead of struggling along in terrible pain. Maybe.

With me in Jaxon’s arms, we move three times as fast as we were when I was limping with every step. Before I know it, he’s depositing me on my bed and pulling off my boot.

“I can take it from here,” I tell him. “Thanks for your help.”

He shoots me a look that tells me to shut up, this time without him ever having uttered the words. Which pisses me off so much that I yank my foot away from him and start peeling my socks off on my own.

“I sprained my ankle,” I snark. “I’m not dying of consumption.”

“Yeah, well, the night is young.”

“Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?” I glare at him.

“It means you’ve been here three days and this is the second time I’ve had to get you out of trouble.”

“Seriously? You’re going to hold me responsible for a wind storm now?”

“I am.” He wraps his hand around my calf and gently but firmly eases my leg over the edge of the bed so he can look at my ankle. “You didn’t see Macy falling out of her tree, did you?”

“The branch broke. What was I supposed to do? Grab onto the trunk and--Oww!” I try to yank my foot away as he probes at a particularly sore spot.

He ignores me, though his touch—already soft—gets even more gentle. “There’s no swelling and only a little bruising, so I don’t think you broke anything.”

“I already told you it was just sprained.” I pull my leg away. “You can go now.”

This time the look he gives me is half-amused, half don’t push your luck. And- despite that—all sexy af. Because this is Jaxon and when doesn’t he look sexy?

“Should I get ice?” Macy asks.

I turn to answer her ... at least until I realize she’s talking to Jaxon. You know, the guy she spent ten minutes warning me about before the snowball fight. “Et tu, Brute?” I snap.

“That’d be great.” He smiles his thanks and she freezes. Like, literally freezes in the middle of walking, one foot off the floor. “Also, do you happen to have an Ace bandage? I can wrap her foot before I go.”

She doesn’t answer.

“Macy?” She still doesn’t answer.

Jaxon glances at me, both brows raised, but I just roll my eyes. Then clap extra loud to get her attention.

“Macy?”

“Oh, yeah. Ice. I’m on it.”

“So, no bandage then?” Jaxon asks.

“And a bandage. Yes. Absolutely. I have a few, actually.” Suddenly she’s stumbling over her words and her feet as she rushes to her bureau and starts wildly opening drawers.

She finally finds what she’s looking for in the bottom drawer and spins around, a tightly wrapped bandage in hot pink bandage in her hand. “Does this work, Jaxon?”

“It’s perfect, thanks.”

She glows under his praise and it’s all I can do not to make another snarky comment. But seriously, if she’s not careful, she’s going to melt into a puddle right here in the middle of our room.

I try to take the bandage from her, but Jaxon gets there first. “I really can do it, you know,” I tell him.

“I know you can. Maybe I want to do it for you.”

As she heads for the door, Macy makes a sound like the melting is actually starting and even I have to admit, it’s a good line. Then again, convincing myself to like Jaxon has never been hard. I’ve been attracted to him from the very beginning, even when I was also afraid of him.

“What? No protests?” he asks a little sardonically.

“Are you going to wrap it or not?” I demand, ignoring his question because answering it would be too embarrassing.

He ducks his head and gets to work, but not before I see the little grin he's got going on. His scar pulls on the very edges of his lips, but that just turns the smile into a crooked little smirk that is a million times hotter than it should be.

His fingers are cold as he wraps up my ankle, but his hands are so, so gentle. I find myself relaxing despite myself, my muscles going lax as he strokes a finger back and forth against my calf.

And when I say his name this time, even I can hear the yearning. His head snaps up, his gaze locking with mine. His eyes are wide, his pupils blown out until there's only a thin rim of brown around the wide black center.

His hand on my leg becomes firmer, more insistent as he leans in just a little. His insanely sexy scent—bergamot and oranges and just a little cinnamon— seems even stronger now than it did when he was carrying me. It fills my senses, makes my mouth water and my hands ache to touch him. Makes me want to press my face into the curve of his neck and just breathe him in.

I'm already on edge from his closeness and these new longings he sets off in me have my breath catching in my throat. My heart goes crazy and, as he leans in just a little further, my whole body lights up like the aurora borealis I'm still dying to see.

"Grace." He says my name like it's a promise. It's the last straw and I gasp, full on melting commencing deep inside of me. I'd say his name back but I've lost control of my vocal chords. And pretty much the rest of my body, too.

His hand comes up to cup my cheek and I close my eyes, lean into the caress. And then nearly jump out of my skin as the door crashes open.

“I’ve got the ice,” Macy says. “I even crushed it up and—“ She freezes, her eyes going wide as she senses the tension in the air. With the way Jaxon is leaning over me, it doesn’t take a genius to figure out what she interrupted, and for a second it looks like she’s going to back her way out of the room.

But then the moment is gone and Jaxon is standing up, heading toward the door himself. “Put the ice on for twenty minutes, and see how it feels. If it isn’t better, ice it again in an hour. Got it?”

“Yeah, I’ve got it,” I manage to croak out of my still tight throat.

“Good.” He risks giving Macy another smile, then shakes his head as she whimpers just a little. He doesn’t say anything else until he’s about to walk out of my room. Then he turns around, hand on the doorknob, and says, “Stay away from Flint, Grace. He’s not good for you.”

The words chase away the last of my vocal paralysis—and good will. “Flint and I are friends. And you don’t get to tell me what to do.”

I expect him to fire back with something—God knows, he’s arrogant enough to believe he should be instantly obeyed—but instead he just tilts his head and watches me for several long seconds. Then he says, “Okay.”

“Okay?” I narrow my eyes at his easy acquiescence. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” He turns to go.

“I didn’t think it would be that easy.”

He gives me his inscrutable look, the one I’m already coming to hate. “This is going to be a lot of things, Grace. Easy isn’t one of them.”

And then he’s gone. As usual.

Double damn it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

For several seconds after Jaxon leaves, I wait for the other shoe to drop ... in this case a rainbow colored Converse in the form of Macy demanding to know what's going on between us. Which I can already see is going to be a problem on a lot of levels, most obviously the one where I have *no idea about what's going on between us*. If anything. Yes, Jaxon has sought me out twice today, but I have no idea what that means. Or even if it means anything.

And what was that parting shot about, anyway? *This is going to be a lot of things, but easy isn't one of them?* Who even says that? Was he trying to say that he's interested in me? Or trying to say that he isn't?

Ugh. Why do boys have to be so complicated? From the day we met, Jaxon's been giving me mixed signals and it's driving me nuts. Isn't it bad enough that my parents died and I had to leave everything I know to come here, to freaking Alaska, and nearly die? Twice? Why can't this one thing—this one boy—be easy?

Maybe he's just playing with me because he's bored or something. Because I'm fresh meat out here in the middle of nowhere. But he didn't look bored when we were out there—in fact, he looked pissed as hell at Flint. Which is ridiculous considering Flint saved me from a concussion or a broken leg or worse.

But a guy who isn't interested doesn't act like Jaxon did right? He doesn't have the kind of temper tantrum—and it was a tantrum, despite how cold it was—that Jaxon had in the middle of that forest because he thought Flint had put me at risk.

Does he?

I don't think so ... but then, what do I know? I've only ever had one boyfriend and the way I felt about Gabe was ... nothing like this. I mean, it was a decent relationship, I guess. We had been friends for years and it just kind of drifted into more for a while. We went places together, made out sometimes, did all the usual stuff. But it was easy with Gabe. He never made me feel like Jaxon does, never made my breath catch and my hands sweat and my stomach flip from just a look. I never spent hours obsessing over his every word, never found myself longing for his touch the way I do for Jaxon's.

I just wish I knew how he felt.

"Oh my God."

Apparently Macy has finally snapped out of whatever weird Jaxon induced coma she's been in for the last five minutes. I shoot her a look. "Don't start."

"Oh. My. God. OhmygodOhmygodOhmygod. What just happened?"

"I fell out of a tree. Flint saved me from dying. Jaxon carried me back to the dorm because I sprained my ankle." I say it all very flippantly, hoping if I keep it casual—if I don't let Macy know how messed up my own head is-- she'll let things drop.

"Those are just the details." She flops down on my bed, careful not to jostle my ankle as she does.

"I'm pretty sure the details are what's important here."

"Not right now they aren't! Right now, it's all about big picture."

"And what exactly is the big picture?" I ask.

"The big picture is that the two most popular boys in school are crazy about you."

I nearly strangle myself on my sweatshirt as I try to get a look at her face to see if she's kidding or not. "I wouldn't say they're crazy about me," I finally manage to get out once I untie my hoodie strings and stop strangling myself in the process. "And aren't you the one who was just warning me to stay as far away from Jaxon as I could get?"

"Yeah, but that was before."

"Before what?" I demand.

"Before I saw how he looks at you." She closes her eyes and makes a sound very close to the one she made when Jaxon smiled at her. "I wish Cam would look at me like that."

"You want your boyfriend to look at you like he's an arrogant prick, used to getting his own way?"

"Yeah, he pretty much does that all ready. I want him to look at me like it physically *hurts* him not to be touching me."

"Jaxon doesn't look at me like that." I'm beginning to think it's how I look at him, though.

Macy snorts. "Baby, if that boy wanted you any more he would spontaneously combust."

Her words warm me, make me feel like *I* might spontaneously combust—especially if I spend much longer thinking about Jaxon. That boy is way too hot for his own good ... or my own peace of mind. And if Macy's right, if he's thinking even a quarter of the things I'm thinking about him ...

"Is it hot in here?" I demand as I start to shrug out of the million and three layers of clothing I am currently wearing

"After three days of watching you be miserable in the cold, I never thought I'd hear you say that," Macy teases as she grabs hold of my snow pants and starts tugging at them hard

enough to pull me halfway down the bed. “Guess all it takes to warm you up is getting up close and personal with the most dangerous boy at Katsmere Academy.”

I slap at her hands. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to help you. These things are hard to get out of if you can’t stand.” She yanks and tugs some more and still doesn’t get much accomplished.

“It’s okay, I can do it.” I bat her hands away and stand up so that my weight is balanced on my unhurt leg as I slide off both the snow and fleece pants I’m wearing. Which leaves me in long underwear and wool socks, both of which are a million times more comfortable than the outwear I’d been sweating in.

Macy strips off her own layers and doesn’t say anything else until we’re both settled back on my bed again. Then she looks me straight in the eye and says, “You’ve procrastinated long enough. Now spill.”

“There’s nothing to spill, really.” I slip under the covers and lean my back up against the wall.

“Umm, I call bullshit on that. You’ve been here exactly seventy-two hours—and I’ve been with you most of those hours, by the way. Not all of them, obviously, because I had no idea the two hottest boys in school were going to have a massive pissing contest over you in front of half the senior class.” She gives me an incredulous look. “When did this happen? *How* did this happen?”

“Nothing’s happened, I swear. Flint and I are just friends—“

“Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious. He’s really nice but he’s never done anything even remotely un-friend-like.”

Macy rolls her eyes. “You mean like giving you a piggyback ride up the staircase or going out of his way to invite you to a snowball fight?”

“You asked him to carry me up the stairs. Altitude sickness, remember?”

“Yeah, and did I also ask him to dive out of a tree to save your life?”

“I’m sure he thought you would have asked if there was time.”

“Oh my God! You are so annoying.” She flops back against the bed. “I can’t decide if you’re lying to me or if you’re just this naïve.”

“I’m not lying. And I’m not naïve.” I give her my most sincere look. “I swear, Macy. There’s nothing going on between Flint and me.”

She studies me for a second, then nods. “Okay, fine. But I notice you didn’t say the same thing about you and Jaxon.”

“Jaxon and I ... Jaxon is ... I mean, we’re ... He ... I don’t...” I break off, cheeks burning, because even I can tell how incoherent and ridiculous I sound. “Ugh.”

“Wow.” Now Macy’s eyes are huge. “That serious, huh?”

I don’t know what to say, so I almost don’t say anything at all. Except Macy has gone to school here a lot longer than I have, which means she knows a lot more about Jaxon than I do and I would really like to benefit from a little of that knowledge.

“That complicated.”

I expect her to ask what’s complicated about it, but she doesn’t. Instead she just nods like *of course it is*. “He’s not really dangerous, is he?” I ask.

Even as I ask the question, I know the answer ... which is, hell, yeah, he is. And you should stay as far away from him as you possibly can.

I mean, he's never been anything but gentle when he touched me, but it's as plain as the scar on his face that Jaxon isn't like the other boys I've known. Every single thing about him screams DANGER. It's in his eyes, in his voice, in the way he holds himself and the way he moves.

I recognize it, even acknowledge it. But when I'm near him, that doesn't matter.

When I'm near him, *nothing* matters but getting closer to him.

Silence stretches between us for several long seconds. I watch Macy, who pretty much has the opposite of a poker face, as she tries to figure out what to say. It takes a little while, but finally she settles on, "He's not Silence of the Lambs dangerous. He's not going to drop you in a pit and starve you so he can make a dress out of your skin or anything."

I burst into incredulous laughter. "Seriously? That's the best you've got? He's not going to make a dress out of my skin?"

She shrugs. "I also said he wouldn't starve you in a pit."

"It's Alaska. You'd need a professional oil drill to make a pit in the frozen ground."

"Exactly." She holds her hands out in an obviously gesture. "See, told you he wouldn't do it."

"Are you trying to be reassuring here, or are you trying to scare the hell out of me?"

"Yes." She grins a little sickly. "Is it working?"

"I have no freaking idea."

My phone buzzes and I almost ignore it. But Heather is pretty much the only one who would be texting me—Macy's the only one at Katsmere who's got my number—and right now, I could use a little of my bff's brand of sanity.

Heather: How was your first day of classes?

Heather: Any hot guys in your English class?

Heather: Or hot girls? Asking for a friend ...

She includes the dtf emoji in the last one and I laugh despite myself. Then take a quick pic of Macy in her tank top and long underwear and answer:

Me: ALL the hot girls.

Heather: Ugh. Mean

Heather: Is that Macy? Maybe I should come visit ...

Me: It is Macy. And maybe you should

Heather: How was class

Me: Altitude sickness kept me home. But I'm going tomorrow

And then, because Heather can go on forever and I really want to finish this conversation about how Jaxon isn't an actual movie serial killer, I text:

Me: Busy right now

Me: ttys

Then I put my phone aside and turn back to my cousin, who is currently scrolling through her own phone. She quits as soon as she realizes I'm done texting, and then says, "Tell me the truth, Grace. Do you like Jaxon?"

Like is too insipid a word for the emotions Jaxon stirs up in me. I'm not sure how I feel—except that I spend way too much time thinking about him. Way too much time wanting to see him ... and wanting *him*, despite the fact that my cousin can't guarantee he wouldn't dig a pit and drop me in it if we lived in a warmer climate.

I don't tell her any of that, though. I can't, when I can barely admit it to myself. Instead, I answer, "What does it matter if I like him or not?"

“That’s not an answer.”

“Because I don’t have an answer!” I explode. “I’ve been here three days, Mace. Three days! Everything feels upside down and backwards and I have no idea what I think about anything ... or *anyone*. I mean, how am I supposed to know how I feel about a guy I barely know? Especially when he ignores me one minute and carries me home the next? He’s different than anybody I’ve ever met and—“

Macy’s snort interrupts my diatribe.

“What?” I demand. “What’s so funny about what I’m saying?”

“Nothing. Go ahead.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “It didn’t sound like nothing.”

“Sorry.” She holds her hands up in very obvious surrender. “I just .. agree. Jaxon is definitely not like anyone you’ve ever met before.”

“You say that like it’s such a bad thing. I get that you don’t want me to like him—“

“Hey, I told you to stay away from him because he’s not an easy guy to be around. Or at least, he never was before. But with you ...”

“What?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs. “It sounds like every cliché in the book, but he’s different when he’s with you. He’s somehow less intense but also more intense, if that makes sense.”

“It doesn’t. At all.”

Macy huffs out a laugh. “I know. But you’re the one who asked. I guess what I’m saying is I’m wary about you and Jaxon doing whatever it is you’re doing, but I’m not totally against it. Not like I would have been if I hadn’t seen him with you today.”

I want to push her on that, want to ask her exactly what she means. But there's a part of me that's sure I already have a pretty good idea. She's talking about the Jaxon I saw in the hall that first day, after Flint carried me up the stairs. Or the Jaxon I saw at the party, the one who looked so cold, so grim, that it sent me running in the opposite direction. Literally. If that's the only Jaxon she's ever seen, no wonder she felt the need to warn me off of him.

"I still don't know what we're doing," I admit, slumping into my pillows. "Or even if we're doing anything. I just wish I knew what he thought about me, you know? Like is he playing with me or is he having some of the same thoughts I'm having?"

"What thoughts are you having?" She asks it so casually that I answer without thinking.

"I feel like I'm obsessed with him. I think about him all the—" I break off when I realize what I'm saying. "You tricked me."

She bats her eyes at me in mock innocence. "I just asked you a question. You didn't have to answer it."

"You knew I was preoccupied and wasn't thinking about guarding my words."

"Good. I'm glad you weren't guarding what you say. You don't have to do that with me." She reaches out and grabs my hand. "Seriously, Grace. Things are going to be weird here for you for a while. But *we're* not going to be weird." She gestures between the two of us.

"Even if you can't trust anybody else, you can trust me to have your back—even with Jaxon. Because I'm your cousin and because I'm your friend."

Suddenly, there's a lump the size of Denali in my throat and I swallow a couple of times, trying to clear it. I didn't know how badly I needed to hear those words until she said them, didn't realize how much I was missing having someone I can just count on—no questions asked, no matter what—to be in my corner.

Before the accident, it was always my parents who played that role. Heather, too, to a lesser degree. But always my parents. It's why losing them has felt so much like losing everything. Until right now.

"You know that goes both ways, right, Macy? You can trust me, too."

She grins. "I already do. I just want to make sure you remember what I said. And that I'm here, no matter what, on your side."

There's something intense in the way she says it—and the way she looks at me afterwards. Like she's trying to warn me and reassure me all at the same time. It's so bizarre that that a frisson of unease runs down my spine, taking away the toasty warmth that comes with laying under my blanket and replacing it with a chill that has nothing to do with Alaska and everything to do with the feeling that I'm in way over my head here, even if I don't know it yet.

I try to ignore the feeling, tell myself I'm probably just being paranoid. I'm smart—and honest—enough to acknowledge that ever since my parents died, I tend to expect the worst in every situation.

It's a bad habit, and one I'd really like to change. So instead of dwelling in the discomfort, I just nod and say, "Good. I'm glad."

Macy grins. "Now that we've got that out of the way, there is something I want to talk to you about." She gets up, crosses to her mini-fridge. "But I'm pretty sure you're not going to like it."

Chapter Twenty-Three

I eye Macy warily as she opens up the fridge and rummages around. “Exactly how much am I not going to like it?”

She holds up a pint of Cherry Garcia with a triumphant sound.

My stomach drops. “It’s so bad we need Ben and Jerry’s?” I demand.

“To be honest, I always need Ben and Jerry’s.” She pulls the top off the brightly colored container, then grabs two spoons off the bright purple utensil cup on top of the fridge. “This just seems like a good time to indulge.”

“Isn’t any time a good time to indulge?”

“Exactly.”

I take the spoon she holds out to me. “I didn’t even know they sold Ben and Jerry’s up here.”

“It’s ten bucks a pint at the closest store, but they sell it.” She smiles at my look of horror.

“Wow. That’s ...”

She grins. “Welcome to Alaska.”

“Guess what you have to talk about really is serious if it needs ten dollar ice cream.”

She doesn’t say anything, just holds the open container out so I can take a spoon of it. Which I do. She does, as well, and we do an ice cream toast—mostly because toasting with the first bite of ice cream is a sacred ritual we’ve had since we were five— before taking a bite.

I wait for Macy to tell me whatever's on her mind, but she just takes another spoonful of ice cream. Then a third and a fourth, until I give up and do the same.

We're about halfway done with the container before she finally says, "I need to warn you about something."

Okaaaaay? "Haven't you already warned me about Jaxon? I thought that's what we just did?"

"This isn't about him. Or, mean, I guess it is, but not like you're thinking." II must look as confused as I feel, because suddenly she takes a deep breath and blurts out, "If you like Jaxon—and I'm cool with it if you do, honest—but if you like him, Grace, you can't keep hanging out with Flint, too. It won't work."

That's so far from where I expected her to go that it takes me a second to actually assimilate her words. And even after I decide I understand them, they still they don't make any sense. "What do you mean it won't *work*? I'm not actually dating either one of them right now, and even if I was ... Surely I can be friends with the other one?"

"No." She shakes her head emphatically. "You can't. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

I'm half convinced Macy's messing with me—because how could she not be—but she looks so serious I have to ask, "What do you mean I *can't*? What is this? The Breakfast Club?"

"Worse. Way worse."

"Obviously, because even in the Breakfast Club they figured out it didn't matter what group you belong to."

"Isn't the Breakfast Club also the movie where Judd Nelson sexually harasses Molly Ringwald by reaching up her skirt when he's hiding under the desk?"

When she puts it that way ... "Okay, so maybe it's not the best example ..."

She rolls her eyes. “You think?”

“Even so, this whole Jaxon and Flint can’t be civil to each other because they head up different groups argument you’re making is crazy. Do you know how many people have been nice to me since I got here?” I hold up four fingers and tick the names off as I say them. “You, Jaxon, Flint and Lia. That’s it. Four people. Which is why telling me that I can’t talk to one of the four people in this entire place who doesn’t treat me like I have the plague is total bullshit.”

“Oh, Grace.” She looks heartbroken. “Has it really been that bad?”

“Well, it hasn’t exactly been a picnic—even without the near death experiences.” Still, she looks so distraught at my words that I can’t help but walk them back a little. “Don’t worry about it, Mace. I haven’t even started classes yet. I’m sure people will loosen up and stop staring once they have a chance to get to know me.”

She jumps on the walkback. “They will, Grace. I swear. They just need to get to know you. We don’t get a lot of new people here, and most of us have been together a long time, even before Katsmere.”

“I didn’t realize that.”b

“Yeah. There’s another school that most of us went to before this one, starting in fifth grade. So if we seem cliquish, that’s part of it, you know?”

“Yeah, but, shouldn’t knowing each other that long make it easier to get along and not harder?”

“It should. And for a while even, it did. I don’t know how to explain why things went bad, except to say that some really awful stuff happened about a year ago and things got completely out of hand. I mean, on the surface it looks like everything’s fine, but once you dig a

little the damage is all right there. And part of what happened makes it really hard for Jaxon and Flint to be on the same side ... of anything.”

It’s pretty much the vaguest explanation anyone has ever given me about anything. And still it has me thinking, trying to piece together the very few things I’ve learned since I’ve been here. “Is this about what happened to Hudson Vega?”

The question is out before I can think twice about it, and judging from the look on Macy’s face, I definitely should have thought twice. “How do you know about Hudson?” she demands, and she’s paler than I’ve ever seen her.

“Jaxon told me. I mean, Lia told me how her boyfriend had died, but then Jaxon mentioned that his brother was dead and I put two and two together.”

“Jaxon told you Hudson was dead?” I don’t think she would look this shocked if I told her I was flying back to San Diego under my own power and suddenly all kinds of doubts assail me.

“Isn’t he?” If Jaxon was lying to me about something like that, I don’t know what I’ll do. I mean, what kind of person--

“He is. Yes. It’s just he doesn’t talk about it much. The whole thing almost destroyed him and I just couldn’t imagine him discussing it with ...” She trails off.

“A pretty much total stranger?”

“Yeah.” She looks a little guilty to be admitting it. “Not that you guys are strangers, I guess—“

“Sometimes it’s easier,” I interrupt. “Talking to your best friend about the worst thing that ever happened to you is excruciating. Talking to a stranger who doesn’t have any kind of

vested interest ... sometimes it doesn't hurt as much." It's weird, but it's also true. Just one of the things I've learned in the last month.

"That makes a strange kind of sense." She puts the ice cream down and leans over to hug me.

I hug her back for a few seconds—until I feel the tears that are never far from the surface start to well up in my eyes. Then I pull back and give her a grin that says I'm totally fine, even if I'm not. "Maybe that's why it seems like Jaxon is different with me. Because he knows I've lost someone, too."

"Maybe." She looks doubtful. "But if the attraction between you and Jaxon is because you've both lost someone ... Just be careful, okay, Grace? The last thing you want is to become the chew toy in a game of tug of war between him and Flint. Because, in the end, you're going to be the one who gets ripped apart."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Seven

PanPants or skirt?

I stare at my closet and all the clothes neatly lined up in it, courtesy of my cousin. I've been meaning to get around to it, but with the altitude sickness and the sprained ankle yesterday afternoon, I never managed to get it done. So Macy did it for me—this morning—even though my ankle is feeling much better this morning. Not great, but definitely good enough to walk on.

Macy let me have the shower first thing, saying she wanted to get an extra hour of sleep since we stayed up late eating nachos and watching . Instead, she emptied my suitcases. Hung up all my clothes, lined my shoes up neatly on the ground, even got my pajamas and underwear in drawers. The only thing she didn't touch is the carry-on filled with my personal items, which I'm grateful for.

Still, I don't know how she did all this in twenty minutes. I know I spent extra long in the shower this morning, trying to chase away the tiredness that comes from staring at my ceiling most of the night, but still. Twenty minutes wouldn't be long enough for me to do more than open the suitcases and try to figure out where to begin.

Apparently, Macy is waaaaaay more efficient than I am.

But having all my regular clothes put away still doesn't help me with my dilemma for the day. Do the girls usually wear their uniform pants or skirts here? Or doesn't it matter? I try to

remember what Macy wore yesterday, but it's all a blank besides the tropical print snow pants she wore for the snowball fight.

"Skirt," Macy says as she walks out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her head.

"There are wool tights to go with it in the bottom drawer of your dresser."

"**Awsome**, thanks." I slip one of the skirts off the hangers and step into it, then add a white blouse and black blazer before going over to my dresser for a pair of black tights.

"If you wear the blouse, you've also got to wear the tie," Macy tells me as she opens one of my dresser drawers and pulls out a black tie with purple and silver stripes on it.

"Seriously?" I demand, looking from her to the tie and back again.

"Seriously." She drapes it around my neck. "Do you know how to tie one?"

"Not a clue." I head back toward the closet. "Maybe I should go for one of the polo shirts."

"Don't worry about it. I'll show you. It's a lot easier than it looks."

"If you say so."

She grins. "I do say so."

She starts by draping the tie unevenly around my neck and wrapping the longer end around the shorter end. A couple more wraps and a tuck and pull through—all narrated by my cousin—and I've got a perfectly tied tie around my neck ... even if it is a little tight.

"Looks good," Macy says as she steps back to admire her handiwork. "I mean, the knot's not as fancy as some of the guys wear, but it gets the job done."

"Thanks. I'll look up a couple videos on YouTube this afternoon, make sure I know what I'm doing before I have to tie it again tomorrow."

Commented [SA102]: I wouldn't mind seeing a bit more skepticism from Grace earlier on. She's seen/heard a handful of pretty weird things by now, but we don't see her asking Macy about any of them. Why is nobody wearing jackets? What were those boys doing "hunting" after midnight/what's the deal with the moon? Etc.

“It’s pretty easy. You’ll get the hang of it in no time. In fact—“ She breaks off at the loud knock on our door.

“Are you expecting someone?” I ask as I move toward the door, motioning for her to move back toward the bathroom as all she’s currently wearing is a towel.

“No. I usually meet my friends in the cafeteria.” Her eyes go wide. “Do you think it’s Jaxon?” She whispers his name like she’s afraid he’ll hear it through the door.

“I didn’t think so, no.” But now that she’s planted the idea in my head ...ugh. My already nervous stomach does a series of somersaults. “What do I do?” My own voice drops to a whisper without the conscious decision to do so on my part.

She looks at me like I’m a moron. “Answer the door?”

“Right.” I smooth my sweaty palms down the sides of my skirt, and reach for the door handle. I have no idea what to do, what to say ... although judging by how tight this stupid tie suddenly feels, I may not be able to say anything at all before it actually strangles me.

I glance back at Macy—who shoots me an encouraging thumbs up—one last time, then take as deep a breath as I can manage before pulling the door open to—

All my nerves dissipate in the space from one strangled breath to the next, largely because the person standing at our door is very definitely *not* Jaxon Vega.

“Hi, Uncle Finn! How are you?”

“Hi, Gracey girl.” He leans down and drops an absent-minded kiss on the top of my head. “I just stopped by to deliver your schedule.” He holds a blue sheet of paper out to me. “And to wish you luck on your first day of class. You’re going to do great!”

I’m not so sure about that, but I’m determined to think positive today, so I smile and say. “Thanks. I’m excited.”

“Good. I made sure you got into that art class you wanted and that you got our best history teacher since that’s your favorite subject. But check over your schedule, make sure you’re not repeating any classes. I did my best, but mistakes happen.”

He tweaks my cheek like I’m a five year old. It’s such a dad thing to do—such a *my* dad thing to do-- that my heart aches a little. But it’s also comforting in a familiar kind of way, so I do my best to concentrate on that and let the heartache slip away.

Plus, he didn’t have to stop by this morning to see me before my first class. The fact that he did means something and I need to not forget that. Just because this isn’t how my school days used to start at home doesn’t mean that this is bad. Uncle Finn is trying and so is Macy. I need to try, too.

“I’m sure it’s perfect,” I tell him.

Macy snorts. “Don’t bet on it. If Dad did it himself instead of letting Mrs. Haversham do it—“

“Mrs. Haversham did it,” he tells her with a smirk. “I just supervised. Brat.” But he makes sure to go over and give her a one-armed shoulder hug and the same kiss on the top of her head that he gave me.

“Ready for that math test today?” he asks.

“Been ready for a week.” She rolls her eyes.

“Good. And how’s that English project going? Did you finish—“

“This is a boarding school,” Macy interrupts, smacking lightly at his arm. “That means parents don’t get to give their kids the third degree over every assignment.”

“That’s because they don’t know about every assignment. I, however, do. Which means I get to check up on you whenever I want.”

“Lucky me,” she deadpans.

He just grins. “Exactly.”

“Are you going to get out of here so I can get dressed? Grace and I still need to get breakfast before class. It *is* the most important meal of the day, after all.”

“Not if you waste it on cherry poptarts.”

“Cherry poptarts are the best.” She glances my way. “Back me up here, Grace.”

“The absolute best,” I agree. “Followed closely by the brown sugar ones.”

“Exactly!”

It’s Uncle Finn’s turn to roll his eyes. But he drops another kiss on her head before heading for the door. “Do your old man a favor and grab some fruit with those poptarts, will you?”

“Cherries are fruit,” I tease him.

“Not that way they aren’t.” He gives me a comforting shoulder squeeze. “Don’t forget to stop by my office later. I want to hear how your first day went.”

“It’ll be fine, Uncle Finn.”

“I’m hoping it will be more than fine. But good or bad, come tell me about it. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Good. See you later, girls.” He winks at us, then disappears out the door.

Macy shakes her head as she grabs her own school uniform out of the closet. “Just ignore him. My dad’s a total dork.”

“Most good dads are dorks, aren’t they?” I ask as I move to the mirror on my closet door so I can start fixing my hair. “Besides, he reminds me of my dad. It’s kind of nice.”

She doesn't say anything to that, and when I glance her way, it's to find her staring sadly at me—which is, bar none, the second worst thing about losing my parents. I hate the sympathy, hate the way everyone feels sorry for me and no one knows what to say.

"That was supposed to be a happy comment," I tell her. "You don't need to feel bad."

"I know. It's just that I'm so happy you're here and we're getting this time to get to know each other. And then it hits me all over again and I feel gross for being happy." She sighs.

"Which sounds like I'm making this all about me and I'm not, because I know—"

"Hey." I break into what I'm learning could be a really, *really* long soliloquy. "I get it. And though how I got here sucks, I'm glad we have this time, too. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Good. Now get dressed. I'm starving."

"On it!" she says, disappearing into the bathroom to do just that.

Twenty minutes later, we finally make it down to the cafeteria, after winding our way past no less than seven suits of armor, four giant fireplaces, and more columns than existed in all of Ancient Greece.

Okay, the last might be a slight exaggeration, but only slight. Plus, the fact that they're black instead of white gets them extra points in my book. And that's not even counting the gold filigree around the tops and bottom of the columns..

I mean, the whole thing is a total head trip. Seriously. Going to school in Alaska is wild enough. Going to school in an actual castle, complete with blood red painted halls gothic Lancet arches is insane. Also, hella cool.

At least if you don't count all the people staring at me as we make our way through the halls. Macy dismisses it as "new girl stuff," and tells me to ignore it. But it's pretty hard to do

that when people are literally turning around to stare at me when I pass. I know Macy said they've all been together for a long time, but come on. I can't actually be the first new person to land here, can I? Just the idea is absurd. Schools get new kids all the time—even schools in Alaska.

Macy interrupts my inner diatribe with an excited, "We're here!" as we stop in front of three sets of black and gold doors. The wood is carved and I try to get a closer look at the designs, but my cousin is in too big of a hurry to show me the cafeteria. Which ... seen one, seen them all, I figure.

But as she throws open one of the doors with all the pomp and flair of a game show hostess showing me the car behind curtain number one, it's pretty obvious that I'm wrong. Again. Because this cafeteria—and it feels wrong to even refer to the room by such a mundane name—is like nothing I have ever seen before. Ever.

I'm pretty sure it even puts the library to shame.

To begin with, the room is huge, with long walls covered in different murals of dragons and wolves and I don't know what else. Crown molding in black and gold runs around the edges of the ceiling and down the walls, framing each mural like a regular painting. The artist in me is fascinated and wants to spend hours studying each one, but I've got class in half an hour so it will have to wait. Plus, there's so much else to see here that I don't know where to look first.

The ceiling is arched and in your face, unapologetic, blood red, overlaid with curved black molding in elaborate geometric patterns. A huge crystal chandelier hangs from the center of each pattern, casting the whole room in a soft glow that only makes its grandeur more obvious.

There are no picnic style tables here, no utilitarian trays and plastic silverware. Three long tables covered in tablecloths patterned in shades of gold and black and cream run the length of the room. They are surrounded by tufted, high backed chairs and set with real china and silverware.

Classical music floats through the room, dark and more than a little eerie. I don't know much about this kind of music, but I know creepy af when I hear it and this is definitely it.

So much so that I can't resist asking Macy, "This music is—"

"Danse Macabre by Camille Saint-Saëns. Overkill, I know, but my dad has it playing in here every year for Halloween. Along with the music from Psycho and another few classics. It just hasn't been changed over yet."

I think about Lia, and how she said the same thing about the pillows in the library. In my old school, the Halloween spirit was pretty much exhausted by reading an Edgar Allen Poe story in English class and a costume contest on the quad at lunch. Katsmere Academy takes the holiday to a whole other level.

"It's cool," I say as we make our way along one of the tables until we find a cluster of empty seats.

"It's insane, but Halloween has always been my dad's favorite holiday."

"Really? That's so weird, considering my dad hated it. I thought it must have been something that happened when he was a kid, but apparently not, if your dad goes all out for the holiday." I asked him once, a few years ago, why he disliked Halloween so much, and he'd said he would tell me when I was older.

Turns out the universe had other plans.

“Yeah, that is weird.” Macy glances around. “But isn’t this place cool? I’ve been dying for you to see it.”

“Totally cool. I want to spend hours looking at the murals.”

“Well, you’ve got all year, so ...” She gestures for me to sit. “What do you want to eat?”

“I can come with you.”

“Next time. Right now you should get off your hurt ankle for a few minutes. Besides, I’m pretty sure today is going to be a little overwhelming. Let me help out where I can.”

“It’s pretty hard to say no to that,” I tell her, because she’s right. I’m already overwhelmed and the day has barely started. I’m also really touched by how hard Macy is working to make things easy for me. I should tell her so, but I’ve never been very good at doing that. And I’m even worse at it since my parents died.

Maybe I’m still in denial. Or maybe I just can’t stand the idea of being hurt any more. Either way, I smile my thanks at her and hope she gets it.

“So don’t say no.” She pushes me playfully toward a chair. “Just tell me what you want to eat, or I’ll bring you seal steak and eggs.”

The horror must show on my face, because she bursts out laughing. “How about a pack of cherry pop tarts and some yogurt with canned berries?”

“Canned berries?” I ask, doubtful.

“Yeah, Fiona—our chef-- cans them herself when they’re in season. Fresh fruit is pretty hard to come by up here once late fall hits.”

“Oh, right.” I feel like a moron. Of course there’s no fresh berries in Alaska in November. If a pint of Ben and Jerry’s costs twelve bucks, I can’t imagine what a pint of strawberries would cost. “That sounds great. Thanks.”

“No problem.” She grins at me. “Sit down and check out the murals for a few minutes. I’ll be right back.”

I do as she directs, picking a chair that faces the wall—partly because the artist in me wants to study the closest mural and partly because I’m sick of pretending I don’t see people staring at me. At least with my back turned to most of the room, I won’t be able to see them and they won’t be able to see my face.

The negative is that I also won’t be able to watch for Jaxon, and I was really hoping to see him this morning. Which sounds desperate, I know, but that didn’t seem to matter at three o’clock in the morning when I was staring at my ceiling and thinking of him and it doesn’t seem to matter now. I haven’t been able to get him out of my mind.

I can’t stop thinking about that moment in the hallway when he whispered in my ear, then nipped at my earlobe. Or the look in his eyes when he pulled back.

I can’t stop thinking of what it felt like to be carried by him, to feel his arms around me and his chest under my cheek.

And I definitely can’t stop thinking about what he said to me before he left my dorm room last night—about how we’re going to be a lot of things, just not easy.

I want to know what he meant by that, want to know if it means he feels all the crazy things I do. It’s impossible to imagine that he does—I knew he was out of my league the first day I met him. But that doesn’t keep me from wanting him, any more than Macy’s warnings do. Or

the air of danger, of darkness, that he wears like a badge of honor ... or shackles, I haven't quite figured out which.

There's a part of me that wants to sneak a look behind me, just to see if I can catch a glimpse of him. But it seems way too obvious, at least with half the cafeteria staring at me. And they are staring—I can feel their eyes even with my back turned. I know Macy says it's no big deal, that it's just new girl stuff, but it feels like more than that.

I don't have time to dwell on it, though, because Macy's a fully loaded tray in her hands.

"That looks like more than poptarts and yogurt," I tease, as I help her set it down so she won't spill anything.

"I did fine on the food, but when I got to drinks I didn't know if you wanted coffee or tea or juice or water or milk, so I brought one of each."

"Oh, wow. Umm, the juice is great. "

"Oh, thank God." She holds out a glass of red liquid. "I was afraid you were going to say you wanted the coffee and then I was going to die."

She flops dramatically into the chair across from me.

"The coffee's all yours," I tell her with a laugh. "I promise."

"Good." She takes a long sip of the hot drink just to prove a point. "I thought all you California girls were Starbucks addicts."

"It was always more about tea at my house. My mom was an amazing herbalist. She made her own tea blends and they were fantastic." It's been a month and I can still almost taste her lemon thyme verbena tea. I have a few bags of it in my carry-on, but I don't want to drink it. And, truth be told, I'm afraid to even smell it in case I start crying and never stop.

"I can only imagine."

There's something in the way Macy says it that gets my attention, that has me trying to figure out what she means. I wait for her to say more, but then her eyes go wide and she starts choking on a sip of coffee.

Before I can turn around to see what's got her so discombobulated, someone asks, "Is this seat taken?"

And then I don't have to turn around at all. Because I'd know that voice anywhere.

Jaxon Vega just asked to sit next to me.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Umm, yeah. Sure. Of course.” As I turn to look at him, the words pour out of my mouth without any rhyme or reason, making me sound—and feel-- like a total idiot.

Jaxon inclines his head, lifts a brow. “So it *is* taken, then?”

Forget sounding like an idiot. I *am* an idiot. “No! I mean, yes. I mean ...” I stop, take a deep breath and then blow it out slowly. “The seat isn’t taken. You can sit down if you’d like.”

“I *would* like.” He grabs the chair and turns it around so that when he drops down into it, he’s facing the back of the chair, one elbow draped negligently over the top.

It’s a completely ridiculous way to sit, especially on a chair this elegant... but it’s also super hot. And it’s pretty much been my kryptonite since Moises De la Cruz did it at a pool party when we were in seventh grade.

What can I say? I’m weak.

Guess I’m not the only weak one, though, because Macy makes another choked sound—this one worse than the last. I tear my eyes away from Jaxon long enough to make sure that sip of coffee isn’t *actually* killing her. Turns out, it’s not, but the fact that the other members of the Order are currently settling themselves down at the table with us just might.

“How’s your ankle?” Jaxon asks, his dark gaze sliding over me in what I know is concern, but what feels a little like a caress.

“Better. Thanks for ... last night.”

“Which part?” The crooked grin I saw for the first time yesterday is back, and this time when he looks me over, it feels a *lot* like a caress.

But just because I'm flustered doesn't mean I'm easy. "The advice about the arsenal. Obviously."

"Obviously." He shakes his head, looks away. But his smile doesn't fade. "So you're planning on going to class today."

It's not a question, but I answer anyway. "Yeah. It's time."

He nods like he knows what I'm talking about. "What's your first period?"

"I don't remember." I pull the blue schedule Uncle Finn gave me from my jacket pocket. "Looks like Brit Lit, with Maclean."

"I'm in that class," says one of the other members of the Order, a guy with dark skin, light eyes, and the hottest set of dreads I've ever seen. "You'll like her. She's cool. I'm Mekhi, by the way, and I'm happy to walk you to class if you want, show you where it is."

Macy makes yet another choking sound—I'm beginning to think her death really is imminent—at the same time Jaxon says, "Yeah, that's going to happen."

The other guys laugh, but I don't get the joke. So I just kind of smile and say, "Thanks, Mekhi. I'd appreciate it, if you wouldn't mind."

That only makes them laugh harder.

I give Jaxon a wtf look, but he's laughing right along with them. Then he leans in and says, "I'll walk you to class, Grace."

He's so close that his breath tickles my ear, sending shivers down my spine that have nothing to do with Alaska and everything to do with the fact that I want this boy. That—despite all the warnings-- I'm falling for this boy-- hard.

"That would—" My voice breaks and I have to clear my throat a couple times before I can try again. "That would be nice, too."

“It would be nice.” There’s amusement in his voice, but when our eyes meet, there’s no trace of laughter in his. There’s also no trace of the coldness that’s as much a part of him as the dark hair and long, lean body. Instead, there’s a heat—an intensity—that has my hands shaking and my knees going weak.

“Should we go now?” The question is ripped from my dry throat.

He looks pointedly at my tray. “You should eat now.”

“You should eat, too.” I reach for the silver package on my tray, hold it out to him.

He looks from me to the breakfast pastries and back again. “Poptarts aren’t what I’m hungry for.”

“So what *do* you want to eat?” The words are out before I know that I’m going to say them, definitely before I register just how suggestive they’ll sound.

This time Macy’s not the one making the choking sound. I look up, tracing it to its origin—another member of the order, this one bronze skin and long dark hair tied into a neat ponytail at the nape of his neck.

“Something funny, Rafael?” Jaxon asks, eyes narrowed and tone silky smooth.

“Damn straight.” He glances at me, eyes brimming with mischief and delight. “I think I’m going to like you, Grace.”

“And here the day was going so well.”

He grins. “Yeah, definitely going to like you.”

“Don’t feel too flattered, Grace. Rafael’s not exactly the best judge of character,” says the guy with twinkling blue eyes and gold hoop earrings.

“Like you are, Liam?” Rafael shoots back. “The last girl you dated was a barracuda.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s an insult to barracudas everywhere,” chimes in another one of Jaxon’s friends, his Spanish accent sexily rolling the rs.

“Luca knows what I’m talking about,” Rafael says.

“Because Luca’s dating history is so impressive?” Jaxon drawls, joining the conversation for the first time.

“Hey, now. How was I supposed to know Angie was a soul-sucking demon?”

“Ummm, because we told you so?” Mehki answers.

“Yeah, but I thought you were biased. You didn’t like her from the start.”

“Because she was a soul-sucking demon,” Liam repeats. “What part of that are you not getting?”

“What can I say?” Luca gives a careless shrug. “The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“Until what the heart wants tries to kill you,” Rafael teases.

“Sometimes even then.” The words are quiet, spoken from the guy sitting to Macy’s right. I don’t know his name yet, but he looks oddly familiar.

“Seriously, Byron?” Mekhi grouses. “Why you always got to shut the conversation down?”

“I was just making an observation.”

“Yeah, a depressing observation. You need to lighten up, man.”

Byron just stares at him, lips twisted in a tiny little smile that makes him look like a modern day embodiment of his poet namesake. And that’s when it clicks. No wonder he looks so familiar to me—freshman year I went through a major Lord Byron phase.

Mad, bad and dangerous to know.

The famous quote from Lady Caroline Lamb goes through my mind . But I'm not focused on Byron's wavy black hair and dimples when I think about her words. No, in my head, they're all about Jaxon, with his scarred face and cold eyes and smile that borders on cruel at least half the time.

Definitely bad. Definitely dangerous. As for mad ... I don't know yet, but something tells me I'm going to find out.

When I think of him like that, I wonder what the hell I'm doing even contemplating liking him the way I do. After all, back in San Diego, dark and dangerous wasn't exactly my type. Then again, maybe that's because I never ran into the genuine article back home. Here in Alaska ... well, all I'm saying is, there's a reason Macy's still swooning.

Besides, there's more to Jaxon than meets the eye. No matter how angry he is, he's never been anything but gentle with me. Even that first day, when he was so obnoxious, he still made sure not to hurt me. To everyone else, he might be as dangerous as Macy warns. But to me, he seems more misunderstood than malicious, more broken than bad.

Besides, Byron called it when he implied the heart wants what the heart want even when it's bad. And no matter how many warnings I get about Jaxon, I'm pretty sure he's what my heart wants.

Suddenly, a weird kind of chiming sound cuts through Dvorak's *The Noonday Witch* (if I'm not mistaken) that's currently playing over the cafeteria's loudspeakers. "What is that?" I ask, looking around to see if we're suddenly being invaded by a bunch of triangle playing guerillas.

“The bell,” Macy says. They’re the first two words she’s managed to choke out since the Order took up residence next to us and all seven of us turn to her in surprise. Which just makes her smile a little sickly before shoving half a pop tart in her mouth.

“Told you you needed to eat,” Jaxon says. And then he picks up a huge spoon of canned berries and shoves it straight at my mouth.

I open, because the alternative is to get blackberry juice all over my white blouse, but I can’t help but give him a you’ve got to be kidding me look.

He just grins in response and waits for me to finish chewing before shoving another bite at me.

I eat the second bite too, then—out of self-preservation-- jump to my feet before I even finish chewing.

“Seriously?” I demand after I finally swallow.

“A girl’s got to eat.”

“A *girl* can decide that for herself.”

Mekhi lets out a little whoop. “That’s right, Grace. Make sure he doesn’t walk all over you.”

Jaxon gives him a look that sends a chill right through me, but Mekhi just rolls his eyes. I notice that he does shut his mouth for pretty much the first time since he sat down, though. Not that I blame him. If Jaxon looked at me like that, I’m pretty sure I’d run for the hills.

“What classroom are you going to?” Jaxon asks as we maneuver our way through the suddenly bustling cafeteria. It’s easier than it should be considering the mad stampede toward the doors that is currently going on. But as long as Jaxon is in the lead, the sea of students does more than just part. It pretty much leaps out of the way.

I fumble for my schedule again, but before I can so much as pull it out, Mekhi answers, “A246,” right before he disappears into the crowd.

“Apparently, A246,” I repeat, tongue firmly in cheek.

“Apparently.” He moves slightly ahead of me to push open the door. As he holds it for me, not one person darts through. Instead they all wait patiently as I walk through and I have the fleeting thought that this is more than just popularity, more than just fear. This must be what royalty feels like.

It seems absurd to even think something so bizarre, but I make it through the door and down the hall without another body—besides Jaxon’s—coming within five feet of me. And I don’t care whether I’m in an elite boarding school in Alaska or a crowded public high school in San Diego, that is NOT normal.

“So, what do you do to deserve all this?” I ask as we move toward the staircase.

“Deserve all what?”

I roll my eyes at him, figuring he’s messing with me. But the blank look he gives me says otherwise. “Come on, Jaxon. Do you really not see what’s going on here?”

He glances around, clearly mystified. “What’s going on?”

Because I still can’t decide if he’s playing with me or if he really is this dense, I just shake my head and say, “Never mind.” Then plow ahead and pretend that I don’t notice everyone staring at me even as they scramble to get out of my way.

So, yeah, that whole blending in plan I hatched in San Diego? Officially dead on arrival.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Jaxon walks me right up to my classroom door—which we get to in what I’m guessing is record time, considering there’s no one else in the room, not even the teacher.

“Are you sure this is the right room?” I ask as we step inside.

“Yes.”

“How do you know?” I glance at the clock. Class should start in less than three minutes and still nobody’s here. “Maybe we should check if it got—“

“They’re waiting for me to either sit down or leave, Grace. Once one of those things happens, they’ll come in.”

“Sit down or—“ I goggle at him. “So you were just messing with me in the hallway? You do notice how people treat you?”

“I’m not blind. And even if I was, it would still be hard to miss.”

“It’s insane!”

He nods. “It is.”

“That’s all you’ve got to say about it? If you know how crazy it is, why don’t you do something to stop it?”

“Like what?” He gives me that obnoxious smirk from the first day, the one that made me want to punch him. Or kiss him. Just the thought has my stomach spinning and has me taking a cautious step back.

He doesn't like the added distance, at least not if his narrowed eyes can be believed. And the way he takes two steps toward me before continuing, "Stand up at the pep rally and reassure everyone that I'm not going to eat them if they get too close? Somehow I don't think they'll believe me."

"Personally, I think they're more worried about being thrown in high school jail than getting eaten—"

The smirk is back. "You might be surprised."

"So you *should* reassure them. Be friendly. You know, show them that you're harmless."

I feel like a moron even before that left eyebrow of his goes up. "Is that what you think? That I'm *harmless*?"

Jaxon doesn't sound insulted so much as astonished and really, I can't blame him. Because I've never met anyone *less harmless* in my life. Just looking at him feels perilous. Standing next to him feels like walking a hundred foot high tightrope without a net. And wanting him the way I do ... wanting him feels like opening a vein just to watch myself bleed.

"I think you're just as dangerous as everyone gives you credit for. I also think—"

"Yo, Jaxon, at some point class does need to start," Mekhi interrupts as he saunters into the room—apparently the only one in this class who isn't afraid of Jaxon. "You going to take off or are you going to keep everyone standing around watching you try to woo this girl?"

Jaxon snarls—actually snarls—as he whips his head around to glare at Mekhi, who raises his arms defensively and takes a big step back. And that's before Jaxon's voice drops a full octave as he growls, "I'll leave when I'm ready."

"I think you should probably go now," I tell him in a voice that's a lot less steady than it was a minute ago. "The teacher needs to start class."

He doesn't look happy and I shove my suddenly trembling hands in my blazer pockets so he won't notice how much he affects me. And then I stare him down.

It takes a few seconds, but eventually Jaxon nods. He takes a step back, a grudging look on his face and it's only as he moves away that I realize my heart is beating like heavy metal drummer.

"Text me a pic of your schedule," he tells me as he moves toward the door.

"Why?"

"So I know where to meet you later." The last of the growliness fades into a grin and I'm left with a small case of whiplash. "How can he go from murderous to mischievous in the space from one breath to the next?"

I have AP Physics right now, so I'm out in the physics lab and won't make it back before you have to go to your second period. But I'll catch up with you later."

"Oh. Right. Umm, okay." My heart is back to going nuts. "Except I don't have your number."

"Okay, fine. I'll text you first." He rolls his eyes a little, but it's an amused look not an exasperated one. Which is a good thing, because ...

"But you don't have my number, either."

"Don't I?"

"No. You've never ask—" I break off because he's gone again. Because of course he is. Because that's the story of our lives. He disappears and I get disappeared on.

One of these days I'm *going* to turn the tables.

Turns out he's right, though. As soon as he leaves, the classroom floods with people. I try to stand to the side, waiting to see where there might be an empty seat, but Mekhi nods me over to the desk next to him in the second row.

I go, even though I don't know if a person normally sits there, because it's really nice to have someone in this class to talk to. Especially since he's grinning at me while everyone else is doing the same old stare and glare.

The teacher—Ms. Maclean—bustles in after everyone has taken their seat. She's an older woman and she's dressed in a flowing purple caftan, her wild, red hair piled atop her head in a haphazard bun that looks like it's going to fall down at any second. She's not young, but she's not old either—maybe forty or so—and she's got a huge smile on her face as she tells everyone to open their copies of Hamlet to Act II.

Half the class has books and the other half has laptops, so I pull out my phone and start looking for a public domain copy. But I've barely typed Hamlet in the search bar before Ms. Maclean drops a dog-eared copy on my desk.

"Hello, Grace," she murmurs in a low voice. "You can borrow one of my copies until you can find one of your own online. And since you look like the shy type—despite your association with Katsmere's most notorious student—I won't make you stand up and introduce yourself to the class. But know that you're welcome here and if you need anything, feel free to stop by my office hours. They're posted by the door."

"Thanks." I duck my head as my cheeks start to get warm. Even the teachers know about Jaxon and me? Not that there is a Jaxon and me, not really. I mean— I cut the train of thought off before it can totally derail me and finish with a simple, "I appreciate it."

“No worries.” She gives my shoulder a comforting squeeze as she heads back to the front of the room. “We’re excited to have you here.”

Mekhi leans over as I pick up the book and says, “Act two, scene two.”

“Thanks,” I mouth back, just as Ms. Maclean claps her hands.

Then, in true drama queen style, she throws her arms wide and says in booming but perfect iambic pentameter:

“Something have you heard
Of Hamlet's transformation; so call it,
Sith nor the exterior nor the inward man
Resembles that it was.”

We spend the rest of the class discussing Hamlet’s shift from perfect prince to total downer. With Ms. Maclean doing her drama thing in the front of the room and Mekhi making sly comments in my ear every couple of minutes, it’s a lot more fun than it sounds. Mekhi may look intimidating, but he’s way more chill than Jaxon—and also really funny. It’s easy to be around him and I end up enjoying class a lot more than I expected to.

So much so that I’m a little disappointed when the bell rings, at least until I remember that I’ve got art next. Art’s been my favorite class pretty much since elementary school, and I’m excited to see what it’s like here. But art class means heading out to the art studio and that means a detour to my room, where I can put on at least a couple more layers to protect me from the cold.

It’s only a five minute walk to the studio, so I don’t need to put on everything I did the last two times I went outside. But I do need a heavy sweatshirt and a long coat—plus gloves and a hat— if I don’t have any plans to get frostbite. Which I definitely don’t.

I just hope I have enough time to make it to my room and out to the art studio before the next bell rings. Just in case, I speed up a little, hoping to make it to the main staircase before the masses.

“Hey! What’s your rush, New Girl?”

I glance over at Flint with a grin as he comes up on my left side. “I have a name, you know.”

“Oh, right.” He pretends to think. “What is it again?”

“Bite me.”

“That’s an interesting first name ... and a phrase you might want to be careful saying around here.”

“And why is that exactly?” I lift a brow at him as we weave our way through the halls. Unlike earlier with Jaxon, the whole parting of the halls thing is currently nowhere in effect. In fact, traversing the school with Flint is an awful lot like playing this old video game my dad used to like, where you have to race to get the frog across the street before one of the eight million cars going by splats him on the pavement.

In other words, it’s a normal high school hallway. I can feel myself relaxing a little more with each near collision.

“You really going to pretend you don’t know?”

“Know what?”

Flint studies me in between several near wipe outs, then shakes his head when I look back at him, brows raised in a definite WTF. “My mistake. Never mind.”

There’s something about the way he says it that has an uneasy feeling sliding through me. It’s the same feeling I got when I saw Jaxon and Lia outside without a jacket yesterday.

The same feeling I got when Flint fell out of that tree and walked away with only a few bruises.

The same feeling I got when Lia was chanting in tongues in the library, even though she had no idea what I was talking about when I mentioned several of the Alaskan languages.

“I’m not stupid, you know. I am aware that something isn’t quite right here, even if I don’t know what it is yet.”

It’s the first time I’ve acknowledged my suspicions even to myself, and it feels good to give voice to them instead of letting them fester below the surface.

“Do you?” Suddenly Flint is right up in my face, his whole body only inches away from mine. “Do you really?”

I don’t back down, despite the near desperation in his eyes. “I do. Now do you want to tell me what it is?”

It takes a minute, but when he next speaks the desperation is gone from his voice. And so is everything else except the teasing drawl that’s as much a part of him as his green eyes and muscles. It’s like the warning never happened, even before he says, “Now where’s the fun in that?”

“You’ve got an odd definition of fun.”

“You have no idea.” He wiggles his brows. “So what are you up to, anyway?”

I stare at him. “Do you ever finish any conversation without starting another?”

“Never. It’s part of my charm.”

“Yeah, just keep telling yourself that.”

“I will.” He walks several more feet with me, happily bopping along to a song that’s only in his head. “Where are you going? The classrooms are back that way.”

“I’ve got to go to my room and grab some warmer clothes. I have art next and I’ll freeze if I go outside like this.”

“Wait.” He stops dead. “No one told you about the tunnels?”

“What tunnels?” I eye him suspiciously. “Are you messing with me again?”

“I’m not, I swear. There’s a whole network of tunnels that run under the school and lead to the different outbuildings.”

“Seriously? This is Alaska—how did they dig tunnels in the frozen ground?”

“I don’t know. How do they drill in the frozen ground? Besides summer is a thing.” He gives me the best Boy Scout look in his repertoire. “I promise. The tunnels are real. I just can’t believe the omnipotent Jaxon Vega forgot to mention them to you.”

“Seriously? You’re going to start in on Jaxon now?”

“Of course not. I’m just saying, I’m the one telling you about the tunnels and keeping you from freezing off all the important parts of your anatomy. He could have mentioned them to you before sending you out into the cruel, cruel winter.”

“It’s fall. I roll my eyes. “Ad are we going to do this every time we talk about Jaxon?”

“As far as I’m concerned, we *never* have to talk about Jaxon.”

“Funny claim coming from a guy who keeps bringing him up.”

“Because I’m worried about you. I swear.” He draws an X over his heart. “Jaxon’s a complicated guy, Grace. You should stay away from him.”

“I find it interesting that he says the exact same thing about you.”

“Yeah, well, nothing says you have to listen to him.” He makes a disgusted face.

“Nothing says I have to listen to you either. You see my conundrum, right?”

“Oooh. The new girl’s got some claws, after all. I like it.”

“You’re a total weirdo. You know that, right?”

“Know it? I own it, baby.”

I can’t help but laugh as he makes a ridiculous face at me, crossing his eyes and sticking out his tongue. “So, are you going to show me these tunnels sometime this year or am I going to have to do my best impression of the abominable snowwoman?”

“Definitely the tunnels. Turns out I’m headed that way myself. Come on.”

He reaches for my hand and makes an abrupt left turn, tugging me down a narrow corridor that I don’t think I would have even noticed if he hadn’t dragged me into it.

It’s long and winding and slopes down so gradually that it takes me a minute to notice we’re descending. Flint keeps a firm grip on my hand as we pass a couple of students coming the other way.

The hallway is so narrow that all four of us have to press our backs up against the wall to keep from crashing into each other as we pass.

“How much further is it?” I ask as we get back to walking normally. Or at least as normally as we can walk as the ceiling starts to get lower as well. If this keeps up, we’re going to be duck walking through this thing like they had to do in the pyramids.

“Just another minute to the tunnel entrance, and then a five minute walk to the art studio.”

“Ok, cool.” I pull out my phone to check how we are on time—seven minutes—and see that Jaxon wasn’t kidding when he said he had my number. I’ve got two texts from him, one telling me that it’s him that came in halfway through English class and another one that came a couple minutes ago that’s nothing but a string of question marks.

I text him back a laughing emoji and a copy of my schedule—not because he demanded one earlier, but because I want to see if he’ll follow through and find me again. Once the texts go

through, I shove my phone back in my pocket and try to tell myself that I don't care that much if he shows up or not. But it's a lie and I am very well aware of that fact.

The light is getting dimmer and dimmer the further we go down this corridor and if I was with anyone but Flint (or Jaxon or Macy) I'd be getting nervous. Not because I think there's anything wrong necessarily, but because I can't help wondering if the walkway to the tunnels is this creepy, what are the actual tunnels going to look like?

"Okay, here we go," Flint finally says as we come up against an old wooden door—one that's protected by an electronic keypad that has my eyebrows lifting to my hairline. Nothing in my life has ever looked as incongruous as that keypad in the middle of this musty, dusty corridor with a door that looks to be at least a hundred years old.

He punches in a five digit code so fast that I don't see any number past the first three. It takes a second, but then the light above the door flashes green at the same time the door unlocks.

Flint glances over his shoulder at me as he reaches to pull the door open. "You ready?"

"Yeah, of course." Another glance at my phone tells me we better hustle or I'm going to be late.

Flint holds the door for me and I smile my thanks at him, but the second I take a step over the threshold, a little voice deep inside of me starts screeching--telling me to not to go any further.

Telling me to run.

Telling me to get the hell away from these tunnels and never look back.

But Flint's waiting for me to go. Plus, if I don't get moving, I'm going to be seriously late to art. Definitely not the first impression I wanted to make on the teacher of my favorite class.

Besides, this is Flint. The guy who jumped out of a tree and took the brunt of a very nasty fall just to save me. It's crazy to think that I might have to run from *him* of all people, not matter what Jaxon says.

Which is why I shove all the new and bizarre misgivings I'm suddenly having back down where they belong. And walk straight across the threshold.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Flint follows me through, then lets the door close behind us with a solid thump.

The room is dim, even dimmer than the passageway here, and it takes a minute for my eyes to adjust. But once they do, I have an overwhelming urge to go back the way we came.

“What is this place?” I demand. “It doesn’t look like a tunnel.”

In fact, what it looks like, is a prison. Or at least the holding area of a jail. There are several cells, lining the wall in front of us, each one equipped with a bed—and, more importantly, two sets of shackles. Castle or not, Alaska or not, I am NOT okay with what I’m seeing. At all.

“I think we should go back,” I tell him, pulling at the door handle to no avail. “How do I get this door open?” There’s no keypad on this side, nothing that I can see that will get us out of here.

“You have to open it from the other side of the this room,” Flint tells me, looking amused. “Don’t worry. We’ll be through here in a second.”

“I thought we were going to the tunnels. I’ve got to get to art, Flint.”

“This *is* the way to the tunnels. Chill, Grace.”

“What tunnels? This is a dungeon!” Alarm is racing through me at this point, my brain warning me that I don’t know this guy that well. That anything can happen down here. That—I take a deep breath, try to shut down the panic tearing through me.

“Trust me.” He puts a hand on my lower back, starts guiding me forward. I don’t want to go, but at this point, it’s not exactly like I’ve got a dozen alternatives. I can pound on the door, hoping that someone hears me or I can trust Flint to do what he says and get me to the tunnel I need. Considering he’s been nothing but kind to me since I got here, I let him propel me forward and pray I’m not making a mistake.

We walk all the way to the end of the room, past four separate cells, and I don’t say a word of complaint. But when Flint stops in front of the fifth cell and tries to get me to go in, my trust and patience come to an abrupt end.

“What are you doing?” I demand. Or screech, depending on your point of view. “I’m not going in there.”

He looks at me like I’m crazy. “It’s where the entrance to the tunnels is.”

“I don’t see an entrance,” I snap at him. “All I see are bars. And shackles.”

“It’s not what it looks like, I swear. These are secret tunnels and when they built the castle a hundred years ago, they did a really good job of disguising the entrance.”

“A little too good a job, in my opinion. I want to go back up, Flint. I’ll make up some excuse for my art teacher for being late, but I—“

“It’s okay, Grace.” For the first time he looks concerned. “We use these tunnels all the time. I promise I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Yeah, but—“ I break off as the door at the other end of the room opens. And in walks Lia.

“Hey, hold the door!” I call to her, slipping out of Flint’s loose hold and making a mad dash back toward the only obvious exit point in this hellhole of a room.

But she's bopping along to some song in her head and doesn't hear me. The door slams shut behind her. Damn it.

"Grace!" She looks surprised to see me as she fishes a pair of earbuds out of her ears.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm taking her to the tunnels." Flint shoots me an exasperated look as he catches up to me. "She's got art."

"Oh, yeah? With Kaufman?" Lia looks interested.

"Yeah."

"Cool. Me too." She gives Flint a cool glance. "I'll take it from here."

"No need for that," he answers. "I'm going that way, too."

"You don't have to bother—"

"No bother. Right, Grace?" He grins at me, but this time he sure seems to be showing a lot of teeth.

Then again, who can blame him? He was trying to help me and I freaked out on him for no reason. "If you're sure."

"Oh, I'm sure." He loops an arm through mine. "I would love to escort you ladies to class."

"Lucky us." Lia's own smile is saccharin sweet as she takes hold of my other arm and starts to walk us back toward the end of the room. As we move—both of them holding on to me— I can't help but feel a little like a ping pong ball caught between them. Or, more accurately, the rope in a tug of war, though I don't know why.

Lia doesn't let go until we reach the final cell. She marches inside and grabs hold of one of the arm shackles—exactly as Flint was aiming to do when I freaked out—and then pulls, hard.

The portion of the stone wall the shackles are attached to opens wide. She glances back at us, eyebrows raised. “Ready?”

Flint looks at me, tilts his head questioningly.

I feel myself blushing yet again, this time out of shame. “Sorry. I freaked out when I shouldn’t have.”

He shrugs. “No worries. I guess I come down here so often I forget how creepy it looks.”

“So creepy,” I tell him as we move into the cell. “And when you reached for that shackle—

He laughs. “You didn’t really think I was going to chain you up down here, did you?”

“Of course she did,” Lia tells him as we walk through the trick door and she pulls it close behind us. “I wouldn’t trust you either. You look like exactly that kind of pervert.”

“And what kind of pervert is that?” he demands, looking between the two of us.

Suddenly I remember what Macy said about Jaxon when she was trying to warn me off him and I can’t resist. “You know, the kind who starves a girl so he can make a dress out of her skin.”

They both stare at me like I’m completely insane. Lia looks a little appalled and Flint ... Flint looks more offended than anyone *ever*. It’s totally inappropriate, but I can’t help laughing. Because, come on. Who hasn’t seen that **movie**—or at least heard about it?

“Excuse me?” he says after a second, more ice in those words than in the entire school grounds outside.

“From Silence of the Lambs? That’s what the serial killer Jodie Foster is trying to catch does to his victims? It’s why she needs Hannibal Lecter--”

“Never saw the movie.”

Commented [WU103]:

Commented [WU104]: Another option is a reference to a famous vampire scene from a movie-- and he can get totally offended at being called a vampire.

“Oh, well, he would kidnap girls and—“

“Yeah, I got it.” He lets go of my arm for the first time since Lia showed up. “For the record, clothes made of skin, not so much my style.”

“Obviously. That’s why I made the joke.” When he doesn’t respond, I bump my shoulder against his. “Come on, Flint. Don’t be mad. I was just playing.”

“Don’t waste your breath,” Lia tells me as we make our way further into the tunnels.

“He’s a total drag—“

“Bite me,” Flint growls.

She eyes him scornfully. “You wish.”

“I wish you’d try.” He returns her look with interest.

“Okay, don’t we need to get to class?” I ask, determined to interrupt whatever this is before it devolves even further. “The bell’s going to ring in a minute.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lia tells me. “Kaufman knows it’s a pain to get to her class, so she doesn’t sweat it.”

But she does pick up the pace—after giving Flint one last look that’s a cross between a snarl and a smirk.

I follow her, leaving Flint to bring up the rear as I figure we’ll all do better with me as a buffer between them. For the first time since last night, when Macy tried to explain that I can’t be friends with both Jaxon *and* Flint, I actually start to believe her. Lia’s obviously Team Jaxon and look how well this little excursion is going.

We’re moving fast through the tunnels now, so I don’t get to check them out the way I really want to. Still, the recessed lighting—dim as it might be—gives me at least a decent view

of where I'm walking. And I have to say, terrifying entrance notwithstanding, these things are freaking cool!

The walls are made entirely of different colored stones—mostly white and black, but there are colored stones too. They gleam red and blue and green even in the dim light, and I can't help reaching out to touch one of the bigger ones, just to see what it feels like. Cool, obviously, but also smooth, polished, like a gemstone. For a second—just a second—I wonder if that's what they are. But then I dismiss it as ridiculous, because what school (even a fancy, rich one like Katsmere Academy) has the money to embed gemstones in the walls?

The floor is made of white brick, as are a bunch of the columns we pass as we walk. But what really gets me is the art that is down here—bone like sculptures embedded in the walls, hanging from the ceiling, even resting on pedestals in various alcoves along the way.

It's an obvious homage to the Paris catacombs, where seven million skeletons are laid to rest—or used for macabre decorations throughout—and I can't help wondering if the school's art classes added the “bone” sculptures to the tunnels here. I also want to know what art supplies the bones are really made of.

But trying to figure that out has to wait, too, if I have any hope of making it to art class even close to on time.

As we follow the tunnel, we get to a kind of rotunda type room that pretty much has my eyes bugging out of my head. It's obviously a main hub for the tunnels, because eleven other tunnels feed into it as well. But that's not what has my eyes going wide, even though I have no idea which of the eleven other tunnels we should take.

No, what has my mouth falling open and my eyes pretty much bugging out of my head, is the giant chandelier hanging in the center of the room, unlit **candles** at the end of each arm. But

Commented [WU105]: FYI, this is kind of what I'm thinking:
https://www.google.com/search?q=church+of+bones+prague&client=firefox-b-1-d&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=Ysrjo1dpOOnv6M%253A%252CCqTWWvA4To9jTM%252C_&vet=1&usg=AI4_-kTTIH22h6JLXrkj4IXMjn0Pdehz5A&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwixlqDwJnKAhUNXKwKHxaqD1gQ9QEwAXoECAkQBg#imgsrc=2B5vOBdGRO3ljM:&vet=1

it's not the size of the chandelier or the fact that there are actual candles in it that catches my attention—although, fire code, anyone? It's the fact that the chandelier, like so many of the other decorations down here, looks to be made entirely of human bones.

I know it's just art, and the bones are made of plastic or whatever, but they sure look realistic hanging off the chandelier—so much so that a chill creeps down my spine. This is more than an homage to the catacombs. It's like someone actually tried to recreate them.

“Why are you stopping?” Flint asks, but then he follows my gaze. “Oh, yeah. I'm down here so often I forget what it looks like to people who have never seen it.”

“This is insane. You know that, right?”

He grins. “A little bit. But it's also cool, right?”

“Totally cool.” I step further into the room to get a better look. “I wonder how long it took. I mean, it had to be a class art project, right? Not just one student.”

“Art project?” Flint looks confused.

“We don't know,” Lia interjects. “It was done years before we got here—years before your uncle or any of the other current teachers got here, too. But yeah, it had to be a class project. No way one artist could do all this in a semester, or even a year.”

“It's amazing. I mean, so elaborate and life-like. I mean ... you know what I mean.”

She nods. “Yeah.”

There's more bones above each of the tunnels, as well as plaques bearing inscriptions in a language I don't recognize. One of the Alaskan languages, I'm sure, but I want to know which one. So I take out my camera and snap a pic of the closest plaque, figuring I'll Google it later tonight.

“We need to go,” Flint says as I start to take a second pic. “Class is starting.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” I glance around as I shove my phone back in my blazer pocket.

“Which tunnel are we taking?”

“The third one to the left,” Lia says.

We head that way, but just as we’re about to reach it, a low grade tremor rips through the room. At first I think I’m imagining it, but as the bones in the chandelier start to clink together in the eeriest sound imaginable, I realize there’s nothing imaginary about it.

We’re standing in the middle of a musty, crumbling old tunnel as an earthquake hits.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Lia's eyes go wide as the chandelier sways above us. "We need to get out of this room.

"We need to get out of these tunnels!" I answer. "How sturdy do you think they are?"

"They won't collapse," she assures me, but she starts moving toward the tunnel that's supposed to lead to the art studio pretty damn quickly.

Not that I blame her—Flint and I are moving fast, too.

It's not a big earthquake, at least not the kind that Alaska is known for. But it's not like the small tremors that I've felt since coming here either. This one is a definite quake.

Lia and Flint must realize that at the same time I do because once we hit the new tunnel, our fast walk becomes a run.

"How far to the exit?" I demand. My phone is vibrating in my pocket, a series of texts coming in fast and furious.

"Another couple hundred yards," Flint says, glancing down at my pocket. "You should answer those."

"Right now?"

"Yeah—" Suddenly, there's a loud rumbling sound coming from the ground, followed closely by a violent shift that turns the quake from rolling to shaking.

My legs turn to rubber, and I start to stumble. Flint grabs me above the elbow to steady me, then uses his other hand to reach into my pocket and thrust my phone into my hands.

“Answer him.”

“Who?”

He doesn’t say, just stands there waiting—and holding me up—as I unlock my phone.

There are six messages from Jaxon.

Jaxon: Hey, thought I’d catch you at art but you aren’t here.

Jaxon: ???

Jaxon: You okay?

Jaxon: Luka says he saw you with Flint. You good?

Jaxon: Hey, where are you?

Jaxon: Answer me, Grace. Are you all right?

“Are you guys coming?” Lia demands from several yards ahead of us.

“Yes!” I type back a quick response:

Grace: I’m fine. Trying to get out of the tunnels but the quake makes it hard.

Then I shove the phone in my pocket and take off after Lia.

By the time I get to her, the quake has stopped. Finally. We book it through the tunnels, just in case it starts again. My heart is still pounding furiously, but I can tell that Lia and Flint think the danger has passed. Which seems insane, considering one of the first thing you learn in California is that aftershocks can happen for days after a quake and sometimes be just as bad as the quake itself.

The ground finally starts slanting upward and relief sweeps through me. We’re almost out of this place. Twenty more seconds and a door looms ahead of us. Unlike the one we originally

came through, this one is covered in drawings of dragons and wolves and witches and what I am pretty sure is a vampire on a snowboard.

It's all done in graffiti style, using every color imaginable. And it is totally badass.

Another day—when I haven't just survived an earthquake in a century old tunnel—I'll stop to admire the artwork. For now, I wait for Lia to punch in the code—59678 (I watch carefully this time)—and then the three of us burst through the door and into what is obviously an art supply closet.

As the door closes behind us, I notice three things at once. One, the light is really bright. Two, the closet is really well stocked. And three, Jaxon is standing in the middle of the room, hands clenched into fists and face set in murderous lines.

For long seconds, no one says anything. And then Lia tells him, "Don't worry, Jaxon darling, I'm fine." She blows him a kiss as she walks right by him into what I can only assume is the art classroom.

He doesn't even glance her way, his eyes—flat and black—pinned to Flint. Who rolls his own eyes as he says, "They're both fine. No thanks to you."

He doesn't move, doesn't say anything—doesn't make a sound. But it turns out I only thought Jaxon was pissed before. Because after Flint's comment, he looks like he's one very small step away from an aneurysm. Or mass murder.

"Get out of here," he growls.

"I wasn't planning on sticking around." Flint doesn't move, though. Instead, he stays where he is—in front of me-- staring Jaxon down.

And that's it. That's just it. "Move," I order, and when Flint doesn't move fast enough, I shove past him.

For a second, it looks like he's going to stop me, but a low snarl from Jaxon has him stepping back. Which only pisses me off more.

"Are you really okay?" Jaxon asks as I step forward.

I try to shove past him, too, but unlike Flint, Jaxon doesn't move. He just stands there, in my way, eyes dark and ... something I can't quite put my finger on as he stares down at me. Whatever the look is, it makes me feel all fizzy inside—like a bottle of shaken up Topo Chico. Or it would, if I let it. Right now, I'm too busy concentrating on the mad to get sidetracked by the rest of it.

"I'm not talking to you about this right now. I'm late for a class that I really didn't want to be late for and the last thing I have time for is all this bizarre posturing from the two of you."

"There's no posturing, Grace." He reaches for me, but I yank my hand away before he can take hold of it.

"Whatever you want to call it. It's boring and annoying and I'm over it. So get out of my way and let me get to class before I forget I'm a pacifist and punch you."

I'm not sure which word shocks him more—the punch or the pacifist. Before either of us can figure it out, though, Flint jumps in with a, "You go, Grace. Tell him to back the fuck off."

This time Jaxon's snarl is terrifying as fuck. It's also loud enough to have the class on the other side of this closet going completely silent—even the teacher. Which, terrific. Just freaking terrific.

I whirl on Flint. "You shut up or I'll think of something really terrible to do to you." I turn back to Jaxon. "As for you, get the hell out of my way or I'm never talking to you again."

Commented [WU106]: Need a really good threat here. Thinking about it.

For long seconds, Jaxon doesn't move. But I think that has more to do with complete and utter astonishment (if his face is anything to go by) rather than a deliberate attempt to push back at me.

In the end, though, he lifts his hands and steps out of my way, exactly as I'd demanded.

"Thank you," I tell him, much more quietly. "And I appreciate your concern. I really do. But this is my first day of class and I just want to go to class."

And then, without waiting for him to answer, I sweep past him and into an art class where everyone—even Lia and the teacher—are staring at me.

Big. Freaking. Surprise.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“Grace! Look out!”

I turn toward my cousin’s voice—the first girl to speak to me since I went off on Jaxon and Flint five hours ago— just in time to see a basketball flying toward my head. I swat it away, then press my lips together to keep from crying out as pain radiates up my hand.

It’s ridiculous that the act of deflecting a basketball could hurt me, but whoever threw it, threw it hard. My whole arm aches from the jolt of coming in contact with it and I didn’t even know that was possible.

“What the hell?” Macy asks the gym at large as she jogs over to me. “Who threw that?”

No one answers.

“Seriously?” My cousin puts her hands on her hips and glares at a group of girls standing by the locker room door. “Did you do this?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I tell her. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter? I heard how hard that ball hit your hand. If it had gotten your head, you could have had a concussion!”

“But it didn’t. And I’m fine.” It’s a bit of a stretch considering I’m still in pain, but I’ve made a big enough spectacle of myself today, thank you very much. No way am I going to start whining about a few mean girls.

Or a lot of mean girls, for that matter, one of whom apparently has a future in professional baseball.

I mean, yeah, I'm not denying it's been a crazy day. I haven't seen Jaxon or Flint since I went off on them this morning, but when it comes to the Order, my temper doesn't seem to matter. Jaxon hasn't shown up at anymore of my classes, but Byron was waiting outside my art class with a parka when it let out—so I wouldn't have to go through the spooky as hell tunnels again, thank God. Rafael sat with Macy and me at lunch plus walked us to AP Spanish, the one class we share. And Liam walked me from Spanish to P.E.

None of which went unnoticed by the other students and none of which has exactly worked in my favor. I mean, I wasn't looking to make a bunch of friends here, but I also don't want to have to dodge flying basketballs every second of the day either.

"You sure you're okay?" Macy asks, frowning at the way I'm wiggling my fingers and shaking my hand.

I stop immediately. "I am sure. I'm fine." The last thing I want is for Macy to make a big deal out of something that could have happened, but didn't.

She shakes her head, but doesn't say anything else about the basketball. And if I catch her glaring at some of my classmates, I'm not going to call her out on it. I'd be pissed if someone was messing with her, too.

Still, it's past time to change the subject, so I ask, "What's all this?" gesturing to the black leotard, tights and sequined skirt she's wearing.

"Dance team," she answers with a proud little grin. "I've got one of the solos at Friday's pep rally."

“Seriously? That’s amazing!” I squeal, even though I’ve never been a big dance team enthusiast. But Macy obviously loves it and that’s enough for me.

“Yeah. I’m dancing to—” She breaks off as the coach blows a whistle.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“It means the period’s over. And since this is the last one, it also means you’re free.”

Macy grins. “Why don’t you go back to the room and chill a little? I’ve got practice for two hours after school, but I’ll come get you when I’m done and we can go to dinner together.”

“Sounds good,” I agree before heading back toward the locker room. No one bothers me as I get dressed, but no one talks to me either. And I gave up trying to talk to people somewhere around lunchtime. It only takes so many cold shoulders before I get the message.

Besides, being in the locker room with these girls is crazy intimidating. I mean, just being on the same planet with them is rough, considering how perfect they are. Stripping down to my bra and underwear next to them is even harder. Not for the first time, I seriously consider the whole aliens walking among us theory.

I get dressed in record time, then grab my backpack and head out. I probably should go back to my room and get started on my homework, but I’m not used to being cooped up in one room all the time. Back home, I was always outside—in the pool, at the beach, running through the park. I even did my homework on the front porch swing, watching the sun set over the water. Going from that to being stuck inside almost all the time is more than a little rough.

I think about going back to the room and changing into all those outdoor clothes so I can go for a walk. But nothing about me is particularly thrilled at the idea of putting on half my closet just to brave the sub-zero temperatures, either, so in the end I decide on a compromise. I’ll

wander around the castle, getting to know it better since there are huge portions I haven't set foot in yet, even with my classes taking me all over the place today.

For a second Jaxon's warning from the first night flits through my head, but that was for late at night. Just because the sun outside the castle has been down a couple of hours already doesn't mean the halls aren't safe now, while everyone is awake and going from one activity to another. Also, I'm not going to spend the next year and a half afraid of the people I go to school with. Those guys last night were jerks, no doubt about it, but they caught me unprepared. No way am I going to let it happen again. And no way am I going to become a prisoner in my own dorm room.

It's that thought that has me wandering out of the main hallways with no real destination in mind. I pass a room where two people are fencing, complete with white uniforms and head masks, and pause to watch for a little while. Then I wander down to the music hall, where a curly-haired boy is playing the saxophone. I recognize the tune as "Autumn Leaves" and just the sound of it nearly brings me to my knees.

Cannonball Adderley cut an album in 1958 called *Something Else*. Miles Davis and Art Blakely played on it and it was my father's favorite—especially the song, "Autumn Leaves." He used to play it over and over when he was working around the house, and made me listen to it with him at least a hundred times, where he went over every single note, explaining over and over how and why Adderley was such a genius.

The last month since my parents died is probably the longest I've gone without hearing that song in my entire life and to run across it here, now, feels like a sign. Not to mention a punch to the gut.

Tears flood my eyes and all I can think about is getting away. I turn and run, not caring where I'm going, knowing only that I need to escape.

I take the back stairs, running and running, until I end up in an alcove in the tower. Most of the tower is taken up by whatever room lies behind the closed door, but there's a tiny alcove right off the stairs. There's a huge window—the first one in the castle that I've actually seen with the curtains open—that looks out over the front of the school. It's dark out, but the view is still gorgeous—the snow lit up by lampposts and the midnight blue sky filled with stars as far as the eye can see.

The room itself has built in bookshelves that go all the way around it and a couple of comfy, overstuffed chairs to lounge in. It's obviously a reading nook—everything from the classics to modern day Stephen King fill up the shelves—but I'm not here to read, no matter how much I usually love it.

Instead, I sink down on one of the chairs and finally, finally, let the tears come.

There are a lot of them—I haven't cried, really cried, since the funeral, and now that I've started I'm not sure I'll ever stop. Grief is a wild thing within me, a rabid animal tearing at my insides and making everything hurt.

I'm trying to be quiet—the last thing I want is to draw more attention to myself—but it's hard when it hurts this much. In self-defense, I wrap my arms around myself and start to rock, desperate to ease the pain. Even more desperate to find a way to hold myself together when everything inside of me feels like it's falling apart.

It doesn't work. Nothing does, and the tears just keep coming, as do the harsh, wrenching sobs tearing themselves from my chest.

I don't know how long I stay here, battling the pain and loneliness that comes from losing my parents in the blink of an eye, but it's long enough for the sky to turn from the dark blue of civil twilight to pitch black.

Long enough for my chest to hurt.

More than long enough for the tears to run dry.

Somehow, running out of tears only makes everything hurt worse.

But sitting here isn't going to change that. Nothing is, which means I might as well get up. Macy should be done with dance practice soon and the last thing I want is for her to come looking for me.

Having her see me like this—having anyone see me like this—is the threat that finally galvanizes me. Except when I climb to my feet and turn around, it's to find that someone already has.

Jaxon.

Commented [SA107]: We need a reason to believe that someone who hasn't felt in hundreds of years would make the effort to do something kind here. They need more interactions before we can buy this—it feels like it would make more sense coming closer to the ½ or even ¾ mark, after we've seen a bit more evidence of his not feeling.

Commented [ep108]: STACY: I think if she adds in the new 30k of scenes I listed everywhere, this works here.

Commented [WU109]: I think I've laid the groundwork enough by now, but let me know if not.

Commented [SA110]: Yup, agree. With the added word count and the new scenes, this should get us close to the halfway point at least. ☺

Chapter Thirty

Jaxon's standing at the head of the stairs, face blank but eyes searching, as he stares at me.

Embarrassment slams through me, makes my face hot and my breath stutter. I start to ask him how long he's been there, but it doesn't really matter. He's been there long enough.

I wait for him to say something, to ask if I'm okay or to tell me to stop whining or say one of the million and three things that fall somewhere in between those two reactions. He doesn't, though. Instead he just stands there, watching me with those black magic eyes of his until I lose my breath again ... this time for a whole different reason.

"I'm—I'm sorry," I finally stumble out. "I should go."

He doesn't answer, so I move toward the stairs, but he keeps blocking them. And he keeps watching me, head tilted just a little, like he's trying to figure something out while I pray for the ground to open up and swallow me.

Now would be a perfect time for another one of those earthquakes, is all I'm saying.

When he finally speaks, his voice sounds a little rusty. "Why?"

"Why should I leave? Or why was I crying?"

"Neither."

"I ... have no idea what I'm supposed to say to that."

"There's nothing to say."

Commented [SA111]: Might be more interesting if she was crying because of something he did, if he was unfeeling somehow? Maybe in class? ;)

Commented [ep112]: Agreed. Since the class was history, he could be trying to teach her a lesson, history is told by the victor, if she disagrees with him about some subject area they're studying. He can even call her naïve and she can say she'd rather be naïve than a skeptic like him. Then she can notice some people are shocked she argued with him but a couple seem to be happy they're fighting, which makes no sense. The whole thing is embarrassing and after class she goes to cry, it's all just too much at this point.

Commented [WU113]: I didn't go with this. Let me know if you think it's okay as is

Commented [WU114]:

“Look, I’m sorry I threatened to hit you in the art studio today. You’re just ...” I blow out a long breath. “A lot.”

He lifts a brow, but other than that, his blank expression doesn’t change. “So are you.”

“Yeah.” I let out a watery laugh, gesture to my still wet cheeks. “Yeah, I can see why you might think that.”

I’m only a few steps from him, but he closes the gap, moving in until he’s only inches away from me. My mouth goes desert dry.

I wait for him to say something, but he doesn’t. I wait for him touch me, but he doesn’t do that either. Instead, he just stands here, so close that I can feel his breath on my cheek. So close that I’m sure he can feel my breath on his.

And still his eyes are dark, empty, blank.

More seconds that feel like minutes tick by until finally—finally—he whispers, “What’s it like?”

“What’s what like?” I’m baffled, and a little afraid that I’m setting myself up to be the punchline of some joke.

“What’s it like to feel like **that**?”

Commented [SA115]: This is great 😊

“Like what? Sad?” Embarrassment swamps me again and I wipe at my cheeks, trying to disappear even the remnants of my tears. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for anyone to see me. I—“

“Not just sad. Anything. What’s it like to feel so much?”

“I don’t—“ I pause, take a deep breath. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

For long seconds he doesn’t answer. Then he just kind of shakes his head and says, “Never mind.” He walks past me, opens the door to the room that lays just beyond the alcove and walks inside.

I stare after him, not sure what I'm supposed to do. It feels like our conversation is over, like he just dismissed me, but he left his door open in what looks like an invitation.

I stand there for another minute or so, undecided, before he finally sticks his head back out the door. "Coming?" he asks.

"Oh, yeah. Of course. I—" I close my mouth with sheer force of will when everything inside me wants to keep babbling. But I'm pretty sure acting like an idiot isn't the way to keep Jaxon Vega's attention.

Still I'm completely unprepared for what I find when I walk into his room ... or what I can't help thinking of as my own private wonderland.

Books are everywhere, stacked haphazardly on nearly every available surface.

There are three guitars in the corner of the room, along with a drum kit that has my mouth watering and my fingers itching to touch it. To play it, like I used to play mine back when I still had one.

Back when I still had a lot of things.

Commented [WU116]: Too much?

In the center of the room is a giant black leather couch, covered with piles of thick, soft pillows that all but beg to be napped on.

And I want to touch everything, want to run my hands over the drum kit just so I can feel its soul. I have just enough self-control left not to follow my impulses, but it's hard. So hard that I can't help but to tuck my hands in my blazer pockets, just to be on the safe side.

Jaxon seems completely uninterested in his surroundings, which seems insane to me even though I know it's because it's his stuff. He sees and touches and uses it every day. But there's a part of me that still wants to know how he can just ignore the pile of art books by the couch or

the giant purple crystal on his desk. It's the same part of me all but screaming that—no matter what Jaxon thinks—I'm nowhere near cool enough to be here, with him.

Since he's not talking, I turn to look at the art on the wall, big, wild paintings with bold colors and strokes that excite all kinds of ideas inside of me. And hanging next to his desk—even more unbelievably-- is a small pencil sketch of a woman with wild hair and sly eyes, dressed in a voluminous kimono.

I recognize it—or at least I think I do, so I walk closer, trying to get a better look. And sure enough—

“This is a Klimt!” I tell him.

“Yes,” he affirms.

“That wasn't a question.” It's under glass, so I reach out and tap the artist's signature in the bottom, right corner. “This is an original Klimt, not a reproduction.”

This time he doesn't say anything, not even yes. He just stands there, rocked back on his heels with his hands in his pockets.

“So you're just going to stand there?” I demand. “You're not going to say anything?”

“You just told me you weren't asking questions.”

“I'm not. But that doesn't mean I don't want to hear the story.”

He shrugs. “There's no story.”

“You have an original Klimt hanging next to your desk. Believe me, there's a story there.” My hands are shaking as I trace the lines through the lines once again. I've never been this close to one of his pieces before.

“I liked it. It reminded me of someone. I bought it.”

“That's it? That's your story?” I stare at him incredulously.

“I told you there wasn’t a story. You insisted there was.” He cocks his head to the side, watches me through narrowed eyes. “Did you want me to lie?”

“I want you to ...” I shake my head, blow out another long breath. “I don’t know what I want you to do.”

At that, he lets out a small laugh—the very first sign of emotion he’s shown since that one, frantic *are you okay* in the art room. “I know the feeling.”

He’s halfway across the room, and there’s a part of me that wishes he was closer. That wishes we were touching right now.

Of course, there’s another part of me that’s terrified of touching him, even more terrified of having him touch me. Being in his room is too much. Looking at his long, elegant hands as he spins a half dollar around is too much. Being touched by him, held by him, kissed by him, is so, so too much that I’m afraid I’ll implode at the first brush of his fingers against my skin.

Afraid I’ll just spontaneously combust where I’m standing. No warning, no chance to stop it. Just a brush of his hand against mine and poof, I’m gone. I swear it almost happened when he carried me back to my room last night.

I wonder if he’s afraid of the same thing, because instead of answering, he turns around and enters what I assume is his bedroom. At least until he realizes I’m still staring at the Klimt—and every other fabulous thing in the room—to be following him.

He kind of rolls his eyes, but then he comes back and gently guides me toward his bedroom—all without laying a finger on me.

“Come on. There’s something I want you to see.”

I follow him blindly. With Flint earlier, I had moments of concern, of worry that it wasn’t safe to be alone with him. Everything inside of me warns that Jaxon is a million times more

dangerous than Flint and still I have not an ounce of trepidation when it comes to being alone in his bedroom with him. When it comes to being anywhere—or doing anything—with him.

I don't know if that makes me stupid or a good judge of character. Not that it really matters, because it is what it is.

Jaxon stops near the edge of his bed and picks up the heavy, red blanket folded across the edge of it. Then he reaches into his top dresser drawer and pulls out a pair of faux fur lined gloves and tosses them to me. "Put those on and come on."

"Come on where?" I ask, baffled. But I do as he asks and slide my hands into the gloves.

He opens the window and frigid air rushes in.

"You can't be serious. No way am I going out there. I'll freeze."

He looks over his shoulder at me, wiggles his eyebrows. And then climbs out the window and drops three feet onto the parapet just below the tower.

I should ignore him, should simply turn around and walk out of this room—out of this tower—and away from any boy who thinks I'm dumb enough to hang out on an Alaskan roof in November with nothing more than a hoodie to keep me warm. That's what I *should* do. Of course, just because I should do it, doesn't mean I do.

Because, apparently, I'm a moron. And part of being a moron means doing exactly what I shouldn't—in this case, following Jaxon straight out the window and onto the parapet.

Chapter Thirty-One

The second I drop down beside him, he wraps the blanket around me, head and all, so that only my eyes stick out. And I have to say, I'm not sure what the blanket is made of, but the moment it's wrapped around me I stop shivering. I'm not exactly warm, but I'm definitely not going to be dying of hypothermia anytime soon either.

"What about you?" I ask, when I realize Jaxon is only wearing his hoodie. It's a heavy hoodie, the same one he was wearing when I saw him outside yesterday with Lia, but still, nowhere near enough protection for the weather. "We can share the blanket—"

I break off when he laughs. "I'm fine. You don't need to worry about me."

"Of course I'm going to worry about you. The weather is insane."

He shrugs. "I'm used to **it**."

"That's it. I have to ask."

Everything about him turns wary. "Ask what?"

"Are you an alien?"

Both his brows go up this time, all the way to his hairline. "Excuse me?"

"Are. You. An. Alien? I can't believe it's that shocking of a question. I mean, look at you." I wave an arm up and down under the blanket, my way of encompassing everything that is Jaxon in one fell swoop.

"I can't look at myself." For the first time, he sounds amused.

Commented [SA117]: She doesn't actually argue with him though, and it feels borderline TSTL that she never asks questions!

“You know what I mean.”

“I really don’t.” He leans down a little—in a little—so that there’s only a couple inches separating our faces. “You’re going to have to explain it to me.”

“Like you don’t already know you’re pretty much the hottest person alive.”

He rears back like I’ve struck him and I don’t think he even realizes that he touches his scar as he says, “Yeah, right.”

Which ... come on. “You don’t actually think that scar does anything but make you sexy af, do you?”

“I’ve never really thought about it.”

“Well, I have. Probably too much. And you’re freaking gorgeous. Plus, there’s the whole everyone’s scared of you thing.”

“Not everyone.” He gives me a pointed look.

“*Almost* everyone. And you never get cold.”

“I get cold.” He burrows a hand inside the blanket, presses his fingers to my arm. And he’s right, he is cold. But he’s also nowhere close to being frostbitten, which is what I would be if I’d stood out here this long in just a hoodie.

I give him a look and try to pretend that his hand on my arm doesn’t flood every cell of my body with heat. “You know what I mean.”

“So, let me get this straight. Because I: one, am the hottest person alive—“ He smirks as he says it, “Two, make everyone afraid and three, don’t get cold very often, you’ve decided I’m an alien.”

“Do you have a better explanation?”

He pauses, considers. “I do, actually.”

“And it is what exactly?”

“I could tell you ...”

“‘But then you’d have to kill me?’” I roll my eyes. “Seriously? We’ve reverted to tired old *Top Gun* lines?”

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

“Oh, yeah?” It’s my turn to cock my head to the side. “What were you going to say.”

“I was going to say ‘You can’t handle the truth.’”

He totally deadpans it, but I burst out laughing anyway. Because, how can I not when he’s quoting *A Few Good Men* to me. “So you’re an old movie buff? Or just an old Tom Cruise movie buff?”

“Ugh.” He makes a face. “Definitely not the second. As for old movies, I’ve seen a few.”

“So if I mentioned starving women and making a dress out of their skin, you’d know I meant—“

“Buffalo Bill, from *Silence of the Lambs*? Yeah.”

I grin at him. “So maybe not an alien after all.”

“*Definitely* not an alien.”

Silence stretches between us for a while. It’s not awkward. In fact, it’s kind of nice to just be able to be for a little while. But eventually the cold works its way through his magic blanket. I pull it more closely around myself and ask, “So, are you going to tell me what we’re doing out here?”

He glances at his phone, then very deliberately looks up at the sky. “You’ll figure it out in about three minutes.”

“Is it the aurora borealis?” I ask, trepidation replaced instantly by excitement. “I’ve been dying to see them.”

“Sorry. You’ve got to be up in the middle of the night to get a look at the northern lights.”

“So then what—“ I break off as what appears to be a giant fireball streaks its way across the sky. Seconds later, another one follows it.

“What’s going on?” I demand.

“A meteor shower. We don’t get many up here because they tend to take place in the summer, when we’ve got daylight most of the time and can’t see them. But when we do have one, it’s pretty spectacular.”

I gasp as another three meteors fly by, leaving long, glowing tails in their wake. “That’s an understatement. This is incredible.”

“I thought you might like it.”

“I do. I really do.” I glance at him, suddenly shy though I don’t know why. “Thank you.”

He doesn’t answer, but then I’m not expecting him to.

We stand out on the parapet for a good half an hour, not talking, not even looking at each other much, just watching the most insane meteor shower I’ve ever seen light up the sky. And I love every second of it.

It’s weird, but something about being out here, looking at the vast night sky overlooking the vast frozen tundra ... it puts things in perspective. Reminds me of how tiny I really am in the grand scheme of things, of how fleeting my problems—and my grief—are, no matter how painful and all-encompassing they feel right now.

Maybe that’s what Jaxon intended when he brought me out here.

When the shower ends, it comes with a burst of seven or eight comets in a row. I can't help oohing and aahing as they burn across the sky. When it's over, I expect to feel let down—like what happens at the end of a really good movie or fireworks show. That little pang of disappointment that something so wonderful is over forever.

But with the meteor shower, I feel ... as close to peaceful as I have in a very long time.

"We should go in," Jaxon says eventually. "It's getting colder."

"I'm okay. I just want another minute or two, if that's okay."

He inclines his head in an of course kind of gesture.

There's so much I want to say to him, so many things he's done for me in the very short time we've known each other. But every time I try to come up with the words, they don't sound right in my head. So eventually, I settle for saying, "Thank you."

He laughs, but it's a sound completely devoid of humor. I don't understand why, until I look in his eyes and realize they are completely blank again. I don't like it, at all.

"Why do you laugh when I thank you?" I demand.

"Because you don't ever have to thank me, Grace."

"Why not? You did something really nice for me—"

"No, I didn't."

"Um, yeah you did. " Under the blanket, I hold my arms out in the universal gesture of what-about-all-this. "Why don't just admit it? Take the compliment and move on."

"Because I don't deserve the compliment." The words seems to burst straight out of him without his permission, and now that they're hanging there, he looks a little sick.

If I was more polite, and less concerned about him, I'd be inclined to drop the subject entirely. But politeness has never been one of my virtues—I've got too much curiosity for that—so, instead, I call him on his shit. "What exactly does that mean?"

"It means I don't do *nice* things. Ever. So it's ridiculous to compliment me on your perception of what I do."

"Really?" I shoot him a skeptical look. "Because I hate to be the one to break it to you, but cheering a sad girl up is a nice thing to do. So is carrying her back to her dorm when she hurts her ankle and chasing off guys who think pranks that can kill people are funny. All nice things, Jaxon."

For the first time, he looks uncomfortable, but he still won't back down. "I didn't do it for you."

"Oh, yeah? Then who did you do it for?"

He doesn't have an answer. Of course he doesn't.

"That's what I thought." I grin up at him, all cocky and obnoxious because, on this, I can be. "Looks to me like you're just going to have to accept the fact that you did something sweet. You won't burn at the stake, I promise."

"They only burn witches."

He sounds so serious that I can't stop myself from laughing. "Well, I'm pretty sure we're safe then."

"Don't be too sure about that."

I start to ask him what he means, but a violent shiver wracks me at the same time—blanket or no blanket, it's freaking cold out here—and Jaxon takes the decision into his own hands. "Come on. Time to get you inside."

Hard to argue when my teeth are about a minute away from chattering. But when I glance up at the window we came out of, I can't help wondering, "How exactly are we going to get back in? And by we, I mean me." Dropping three feet out of a window is one thing. Boosting myself back up is another thing entirely.

But Jaxon just shakes his head. "Don't worry. I've got you, Grace."

Before I can figure out why those words sizzle through me like a lightning bolt, he's grabbing onto the windowsill and swinging himself inside. The whole move takes about one point four seconds and I have to admit, I'm impressed. Then again, nearly everything Jaxon does impresses me, whether he means it to or not. *He* impresses me. More, he makes me feel not so alone at a time when I've never been lonelier.

He's back in moments, poking his head and upper body out of the window. "Give me your hands."

I lift my arms up without a second thought and he grabs onto my forearms, right below the elbow, and pulls. Seconds later, I'm back through the window and standing an inch—maybe two—from Jaxon.

And for once his eyes aren't dead. They're on fire. And they're focused Directly. On. Me.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I stare back at him, not sure what to expect ... or what to do. There's a part of me that thinks he's going to back up and a part of me that really hopes he doesn't. A part of me that wonders what it would feel like to kiss him and a part of me that thinks I should run for the hills, because Jaxon might not be an alien, but he's not like any boy I've ever met either. And I am more than honest enough to admit that much as I may want him, there's no way I can actually handle him.

In the end, he doesn't kiss me. But he doesn't back up, either. And neither do I. So we stand there for I don't know how long, him looking down, me looking up, the air between us loaded, heavy, electric.

I'm in it now, captivated by everything Jaxon is and everything he isn't despite my fears. I wait for him to make a move, but he doesn't. He just keeps looking at me with those midnight eyes of his, pupils blown out and emotion seething right below the surface. It makes me ache for him. Makes me physically hurt as I remember the question he asked earlier, the one that started all of this.

I finally have the words—or in this case, the word—to answer him. “Overwhelming,” I say just as he starts to slide the blanket from my shoulders.

He freezes, the blanket—and his hands—hovering somewhere around the middle of my back. “What are you talking about?”

“You asked me what it was like to feel as much as I do. It’s overwhelming. But what you just did for me ... it makes everything a little more bearable. So thank you. Seriously.”

“Grace ...”

I take one step closer, until my breasts are just brushing against his chest. I don’t know what I’m doing here. I’ve never made a move on a guy in my life and Jaxon isn’t just any guy. I’m flying blind, but that doesn’t matter now. Nothing does, except touching him somehow. I want him to feel soft strength of my arms and my body against his. Want to feel the warm power of him against my own.

Except he’s not warm at all, that hoodie of his obviously no defense against the weather, despite what he said.

“Jaxon, you’re freezing!” I pull the blanket from his hands and throw it around his shoulders before wrapping it all the way around him. Then I rub my hands up and down his blanket-covered arms, trying to chafe some warmth back into him.

“I’m fine,” he says, trying to pull away.

“You’re obviously not fine. I’ve never felt anyone as cold as you are right now.”

“I’m fine!” he barks again, and this time he does take a step back. Several steps in fact.

Everything inside me freezes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ...” I break off, because I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what I’ve done that is so wrong.

“Grace ...” His voice trails off, too. And in that moment, he looks different than all the other times. He isn’t confident, isn’t amused, isn’t even stoically silent as he was when I was yelling at him in the art studio.

No, right now he just looks ... vulnerable.

There's a desire in his eyes, a craving that has nothing to do with wanting me and everything to do with needing me. Needing my comfort. Needing my touch.

I can no more deny him than I can jump off this tower and fly under my own power. So I cup his face in my hands, stroke my thumbs over his insane cheekbones and my fingers over his scar.

His breath catches—I hear it in his chest, feel it against me. And though my heart is beating faster than a metronome on high, I don't back away. I can't. I'm dazzled, mesmerized, enthralled.

All I can think about is him.

All I can see is him.

All I can smell and hear and taste is him. And nothing has ever felt so right.

"Can I ask you a question?" I move even closer to him, unable to stop myself. Unwilling to stop myself.

"Of course." For a second I think he's going to take a step back, but he doesn't. Instead, he opens up the blanket and wraps it around me too, so that his arms are around my waist and we're both sheltered within it.

"Who did that Klimt sketch remind you of When you bought it?"

"You." The answer comes fast and honest. "I just didn't know it yet."

And just like that I melt. Then I do the only thing I can do. The only thing I want to do. I push up on my tiptoes and I kiss him.

It's not a passionate kiss, not a hard kiss, definitely not a wild kiss. It's just the brush of my lips against his, as soft as a snowflake, as delicate as the permafrost that stretches in all directions.

But for me, at least, it's just as powerful. Maybe more.

Jaxon doesn't respond for one second, two, and I start to pull away, convinced I've made a terrible mistake. But then his hands are on my upper arms, holding me in place. His fingers squeezing tightly, pulling me against him as his mouth goes crazy on mine.

Lips, tongue, teeth, it's a cacophony of sensations—a riot of pleasure—as he takes me. As he takes and takes and takes ... and gives back even more.

It's a good thing he's holding on to me because my head spins and my knees go weak at the first swipe of his tongue along mine—just like one of those heroines from a novel. I've been kissed before. I've even had one semi-serious boyfriend. But no kiss they gave me ever felt anything like this.

I strain against him, try to slide my arms up around his neck, but his hands are vices on my biceps, holding me in place. Holding me still, so that all I can do is take what he gives me.

And he gives a lot, head tilting, mouth moving on mine. My head gets lighter, my knees get weaker, and I swear I feel the ground trembling beneath my feet. And still the kiss goes on.

The trembling gets worse and it hits me a second before my knees buckle. It's not just our kiss. The earth is actually shaking, again.

“Earthquake!” I manage to squeak out, wrenching my lips from his.

Jaxon doesn't listen at first, just follows my lips with his like he wants to keep on kissing me forever. And I almost let it go, almost melt back into him—I'm a California girl, after all. If it was a bad one, things would already be falling off the walls.

But it must hit Jaxon at the same time I'm about to forget about it, because not only does he let me go, but he's halfway across the room between one breath and the next. “

I watch as he clenches his fists by his side, as he takes a long, slow, deep breath ... and then another and another as the earth continues to shake.

“It's okay,” I tell him. “It's just a small quake, nowhere near as bad as the one this morning. It'll be over in a second.”

“You have to go.”

“What?” I couldn't have heard him right. He couldn't have been kissing me like he wants to devour me a few seconds ago and now be demanding that I leave in a voice as cold as the air outside. “It's fine—“

“It's not fine,” he snaps out, and it's the only sign of emotion from him now that his face and eyes are blank again. “You. Need. To. Go!”

“Jaxon—“ I can't stop myself from reaching for him. “Please—“

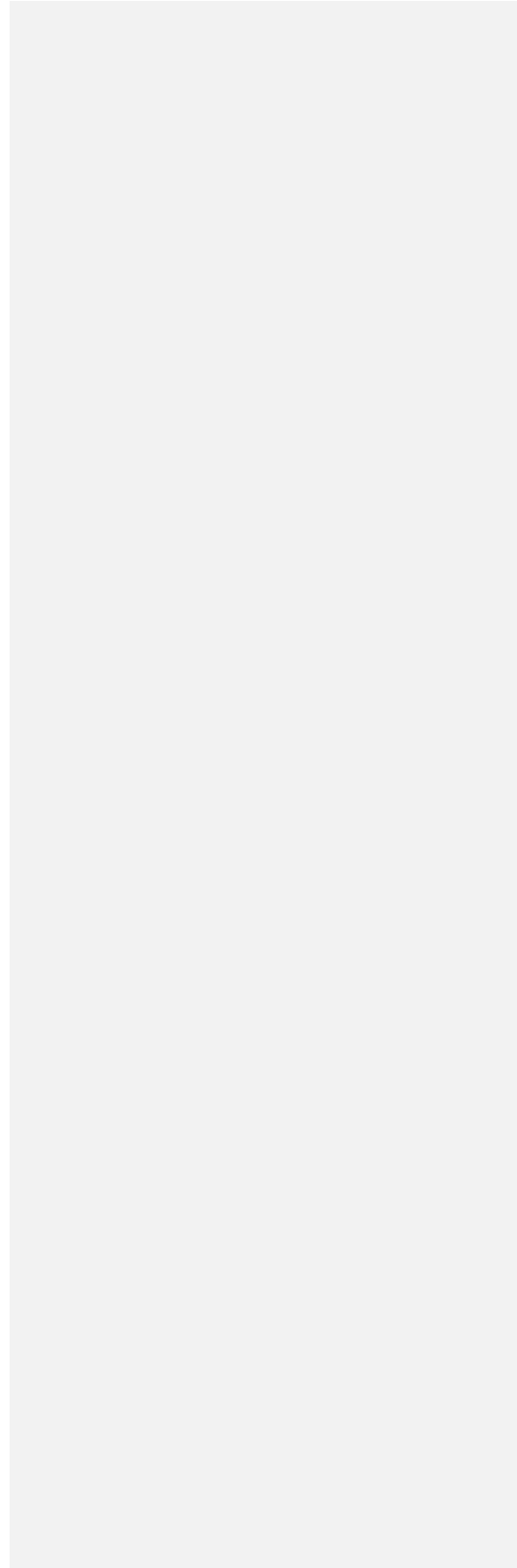
All of a sudden, his bedroom window shatters, glass flying in all directions. It sounds like an explosion and I let out a strangled scream as shards of glass hit me above my eyebrow and on my neck. A piece strikes me above my eyebrow, several more hit my cheek, my neck, my shoulder.

“Go!” Jaxon shouts and this time there's no defying him. Not when he looks and sounds so terrifying.

He advances on me then, fingers flexing and eyes burning like black coals in a face livid with rage.

I turn and run as fast as my weak knees will carry me, determined to make it to the staircase, to freedom, before this strange, monstrous version of Jaxon overtakes me.

I don't make it.



Chapter Thirty-Three

I wake up in my bedroom with bandages on my neck and face and arm—and absolutely no memory of how I got here.

Macy is sitting cross legged on the end of my bed, my uncle is standing by the door and a woman I assume is the school nurse is hovering over me. With her waist length black hair, blood red nails, and stern face, she looks nothing like any nurse I’ve ever seen, but she’s got a stethoscope around her neck and roll of bandages in her hand.

“See, Finn, here she is. I told you the sedative wouldn’t knock her out for long.” She smiles at me and though it is open and inviting, she still manages to look intimidating af. I think it’s the long, beaklike nose, but it could also be the medicine she said she gave me. I’m awake, but I still feel really fuzzy, like nothing is quite what it appears.

“How are you feeling Grace?”

“I’m okay,” I answer, because I am.

“Yeah?” She leans over me. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Three.”

“What day is it?”

“Tuesday”

“Where are you?”

“In Alaska.”

“See, I told you she was going to be okay. She lost some blood, but—“

“Jaxon!” I don’t know how I could have forgotten. “Is he okay? He was ...” I stop when I realize I don’t have a clue what to say next.

I remember him kissing me.

I remember the earthquake.

I remember the window breaking.

But everything else is a blur. I know I was bleeding at one point—hence the bandages—and I know I was running, but I don’t know why. And no matter how hard I wrack my brain, I can’t remember anything else.

“Jaxon’s fine,” my uncle says, and I’ve never heard him sound so grim. “You don’t need to worry about him bothering you again.”

“He didn’t bother me. We’re ... friends.”

“No,” my uncle says, and I swear he’s practically foaming at the mouth. “You are not friends. And you aren’t going to be.”

“Finn.” The nurse puts out a cautioning hand. “Let’s all just calm down a little—“

“No, Marise, I won’t calm down. I promised my brother I would take care of Grace if anything happened to him. And taking care of her does not include letting Jaxon Vega anywhere near her.”

“He didn’t do anything.” I sit up, swing my legs over the side of the bed. “Where is he?”

“Whoa there, Grace.” Marise puts her hand on my shoulder. “Let’s get you back under the covers. You’re still sedated and you don’t need to be running around the school right now.”

“Yeah, but I—“

For the first time, Macy catches my eye. She shakes her head almost imperceptibly, but the look on her face tells me not to push right now.

So I don't. I'm not happy about it, but Macy knows her dad's danger signals way better than I do. Instead I settle back against my pillows and try to figure out what the hell happened in Jaxon's room and why it has my uncle so upset.

"Sorry," I mutter, though the truth is I'm feeling anything but.

"No, Grace. I'm the one who's sorry. I should have given you more of an introduction to Katsmere Academy. I guess I thought ignorance would keep you safe."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that, like any school, it takes a little time to learn the ropes here," Marise says, and the look she gives my uncle tells him now is not the time to discuss those ropes. "I'm sure Macy will help you out with a lot of it. Plus, you're a smart girl. I think you'll be fitting in here in no time."

I think about today, about how almost no one wanted anything to do with me, and I doubt it. Especially if my uncle doesn't want me anywhere near Jaxon. Taking out Jaxon means taking out the Order, which means he's literally just cut my friend group by two-thirds. And that's not even counting the fact that I want to be *more* than friends with Jaxon, not less. I just wish I knew how he felt about me.

That kiss we shared says he feels something, but I don't know what my uncle said to him. Whatever it is, I'm pretty sure it wasn't good.

"Are you thirsty, Grace?" Marise asks. "Do you want some juice?"

For the first time I realize I am thirsty. Like, really, really thirsty. Like, can't remember the last time I needed a drink this badly thirsty. "Yes, please. Or water. Anything would be good."

"Let's start with a little cranapple juice. The sugar will be good for you, and then we'll go from there."

"Why do I need sugar?" I ask, even as I accept the small bottle she hands me. I drink it down in one gulp and pretend I don't see the look she exchanges with Uncle Finn.

"Can I have another?"

"Of course." A second bottle appears in her hand, though I would swear she didn't even turn around. I'm too thirsty to care, though, so I take it with a murmured thank you. I try to drink it more slowly, but end up chugging this one, too.

But I'm not so thirsty that I don't realize no one answered my question. I also realize there's a bandage on the back of my hand, right where an IV would go. Which is impossible, except the evidence is pretty much right in front of my eyes.

Still, just to be sure I peel the bandage back and am not the least bit surprised when I'm confronted with what is obviously the remnants of a large needle prick. "What happened to me?" I demand, looking from my uncle to Macy.

Marise is the one who answers. "You lost a lot of blood," she tells me. "The glass in your neck nicked your artery."

"My artery?" My hand flies to my neck as panic sets in for the first time. That's how my mother died. An arterial bleed out before the ambulance could arrive.

"You're fine," my uncle says, his voice more soothing than I've ever heard it. He reaches for my hand, pats it a few times. "Thankfully we got to you in time."

“Thankfully Jaxon got her to my office in time,” Marise corrects him gently but firmly.

“He saved your life, Grace.”

“Then why are you mad at him?” I demand of my uncle. “It’s not his fault the window broke. The earthquake did it.”

My uncle doesn’t say anything, and neither do Marise or Macy. Which seems strange, but then this whole situation seems strange. I mean, what are the odds that the window would shatter like that when nothing else in the room was touched? And then what are the odds that the flying glass would actually nick my artery? It seems like such a longshot.

Maybe too long of a shot. I wish I could think more clearly, but the sedative is pulling on me, making me drowsy and confused when all I want is some clarity.

“What about my other cuts?” My hand goes to my cheek, and the bandage there. “Are they bad?”

“No, not at all. They’ll be healed in no time, and none of them were deep enough to leave a scar.”

“Except on my neck.”

“Yes.” She sounds reluctant to admit it. “You will have a small scar on your neck.”

“Better than the alternative, I guess.” I smile at her. “Thanks for taking care of me. I appreciate it.”

“Of course, Grace. You are a model patient.”

We’ll see if she still thinks so after I sneak out of my room tonight to go to Jaxon’s. I want to see him, want to make sure he wasn’t hurt, too. I also want to know what happened between the glass breaking and me getting to the nurse’s office and why my uncle is so angry with him. I hate that I can’t remember anything. It makes me feel completely out of control and

I hate that feeling. It gets my anxiety all up, so much so that I'm sure I'd have a panic attack if it wasn't for the sedative..

"Is it okay that I'm still so sleepy?" I ask, not because I actually want to take a nap but because I want everyone to stop hovering. Especially my uncle.

"Of course," Marise tells me. "It will probably be tomorrow morning before all the sedation wears off." She turns to my uncle. "Why don't we head out, Finn? Give Grace a chance to rest. I'll come back and check on her before bed and, in the meantime, I'm sure Macy will get us if there's any problem."

"Of course I will." Macy gives her father the most virtuous look I have ever seen on her face or any other. If I wasn't so impressed—and desperate for him to leave—I'd probably burst out laughing.

"How about you?" my uncle asks, stroking a hand over the top of my head. "You okay with us leaving so you can get some sleep, Grace?"

"Of course. It feels rude to sleep while you're here, but I'm just so tired, Uncle Finn." Turns out Macy isn't the only one who can lay it on thick.

"Okay, then. I'll head out. Macy, why don't you come with me? You can grab some food for you and Grace from the dining room before Marise leaves." He looks at me. "You must be hungry."

I am, actually, now that he mentions it. Starved, actually. "I would love something to eat."

"Nothing too heavy," Marise warns. "Some soup and maybe some fruit to start with. If that stays down, we can talk about something a little more substantial."

“Of course.” Macy sends me a reassuring look, then loops her arm through her father’s. “Come on, Daddy. Let’s get going. I want to get Grace something to eat before she falls back to sleep.”

My uncle walks out right behind her, and I tell myself I have to remember to do something really nice for Macy to pay her back for her help with him. Doing her laundry for a month, maybe, or cleaning the bathroom the next several times. Something to let her know how much I appreciate everything she’s done for me.

After they leave, I’m a little nervous about being left alone with Marise, but she seems content to let me “doze,” and I’m prepared to take full advantage of it. *After* I find out if my uncle was telling the truth about Jaxon being okay.

“Was anyone else injured during the earthquake?” I ask, after she settles herself in my desk chair.

Marise looks uncomfortable, which is strange considering she’s the school nurse and this should be right up her alley. Logic says she’s worried about student confidentiality or something like that, but there’s a little voice in the back of my head telling me it’s something more. Telling me that everything at this school is a little more. A little extra. I don’t know what it is yet, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to keep digging until I find out.

“Everyone’s fine, Grace. You were the only one injured.”

“Lucky me.”

“I know. It’s a shame, really. But at least you’re on the mend, now.”

I don’t feel like I’m on the mend. I feel like I’ve been run over by a snowplow ... twice. But I’m not stupid enough to tell her that. Besides, if I really did lose as much blood as they say,

I'm pretty sure what I'm feeling is normal. So there's no use whining about it. "Yeah. By the way, how long before you take the stitches out?"

"Stitches?" She seems baffled at the suggestion, which doesn't make any sense at all.

"For the artery tear? You did stitch it up, right? Or is it that just something they do on *House* and *Grey's Anatomy*?"

"Oh, right. Of course. The ones I used on the artery will melt away, so no worries there."

"And the ones on the outside? That closed the wound?"

"They'll melt away, too," she tells me.

Her answer strikes me as odd, but I'm not a nurse so I'm willing to go with it. At least until she continues, "Keep that cut covered, by the way. Come to me tomorrow and I'll change the dressing for you, but don't uncover it on your own for at least a week."

"A week? What about when I take a shower?"

"I'll give you some waterproof film you can put over the bandages. It will keep them dry, even when you're washing your hair."

Seems like a lot of work for a wound that should heal pretty normally, but I'm not going to call her on it. At least not yet. Instead, I just say, "Thanks," before closing my eyes and pretending to fall asleep.

Pretending, because no matter how drowsy I am, something doesn't feel right here, including the fact that a school nurse sewed up my artery. Where I come from, that's a doctor's job, pure and simple. But this is Alaska and we are nearly an hour from the closest hint of civilization. It probably stands to reason that Marise can do a lot more than an average school nurse. Maybe she's a nurse practitioner, or something.

Either way, I'm grateful when Macy finally gets back. I keep pretending to be asleep until Marise finally leaves, but as soon as the door closes behind her, I spring up in bed.

"What aren't you telling me?" I demand of my cousin, who screams and nearly drops the tray she's carrying.

"I thought you were asleep!"

"I wanted to make sure Marise left." I throw back my covers and swing my legs off the side of the bed so that my feet are on the floor.

"You need to lay back down," Macy admonishes.

"I *need* to find out what really happened to me," I counter.

"You really don't remember?" She sets the tray down on her desk, but she doesn't turn around to face me. Instead, she fusses with the dishes on the tray until I want to scream. After all, there's only so much prep a bowl of already heated up soup needs.

Which is why I push to my feet, ignoring how lightheaded I feel, and start to walk over to her. The room begins swaying before I'm halfway there, though, and I put a hand on the wall to steady myself.

Just a small nick, my ass. I'm in seriously bad shape here.

Macy turns around and shrieks all over again when she sees how unsteady I am. "Get back in bed!" she orders, grabbing my arm and throwing it over her shoulders. "Come on, I'll help you."

"Tell me the truth. Did my artery actually get cut by glass?" I ask, refusing to let her move me until I get some of my questions answered.

"Your artery was nicked. I saw the blood myself."

"That's not what I asked."

“Yeah, but that’s all I know. I wasn’t there when Jaxon brought you to the nurse, you know. I was at dance practice.”

“Oh, right.” I sigh, fighting the urge to pull out a chunk or two of hair. “Sorry. I just feel like something is off about the whole story.”

“I don’t know. It sounds like it makes sense to me. Although I do feel like the whole broken window/cut artery thing feels like a freak accident. One that has astronomical odds.”

“That’s what I was thinking earlier. For this whole thing to happen, the odds are way skewed. I just don’t know what to do about it.”

“Right now? Absolutely nothing that doesn’t involve crawling back into your bed and getting some sleep. Marise would kill me if she saw you up wandering around the room and my dad would totally freak out.”

I finally let her help me back to my bed, but I grab the pencil bag off my desk as she does. I’ve got a mirror inside and I want to get a look at the damage.

“What kind of soup do you want?” Macy asks as she settles me down into a bed whose sheets seem a lot smoother than when I climbed out of it. Which makes no sense considering Macy has been across the room the whole time.

“Hey, did you fix this?”

“What?”

“My bed. It was a mess when I got out of it.”

“Oh, yeah. I uh ...” She moves her hand horizontally, in a kind of smoothing motion.

“Wow, I must be more out of it than I think.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just ... I didn’t see you come over here at all.”

“I did it when you were leaning against the wall. You had your eyes closed for a minute and I didn’t want to disturb you while you were getting your bearings.”

That doesn’t seem right. I was sure she came right over to me once she realized I was standing. Then again, I’m the one who’s totally drugged while she’s the one who has all her faculties. Besides, what does it matter, anyway? It’s not like my bed made itself.

“Well, I appreciate it,” I tell her as I pull back the covers and climb into bed. “So thanks.”

“No worries.” Still, she looks a little pale as she reaches for the food tray. “I brought potato, chicken noodle and corn chowder. I didn’t know what kind of soup you like.”

“Honestly, I’m hungry enough that I’ll eat anything. So pick what you want and give me whatever’s left.”

“That doesn’t seem right. You’re the sick one.”

“Exactly. I’m so drugged it won’t matter. Besides, tomato soup is pretty much the only kind I really don’t like, so just give me something.”

In the end, she hands me the corn chowder and a bowl of canned fruit—peaches this time.

I’m so hungry that I scarf half the bowl down in three minutes flat. Macy eats at a more sedate rate, and after I’ve taken the edge off, I can’t help asking. “Is there something you guys aren’t telling me?”

Her face goes blank and suddenly she’s staring at a spot on the wall behind my left ear, which is pretty much a glowing red arrow pointing to the word *YES*, if you ask me. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” Which is true. I don’t have any concrete proof that something strange is going on. I just know that something doesn’t feel right—about any of this. “It just feels like there’s more to the story. A shard of glass really pierced my artery.”

“It did.” On this, Macy has no problem looking normal—or looking me straight in the eyes. “And you lost a lot of blood from it. Jaxon got you there from his room as fast as he could, but it’s a big castle and the tower is at the complete opposite end from the nurse’s office.”

“So why’s your dad mad at Jaxon then? It sounds like he saved my life.”

“He did.” And just like that, she’s focused on the wall again. “It’s just ... I think he blames him for you being injured.”

“He blames him for an earthquake?” I ask incredulously. “Does that even make sense?”

“None of this makes sense. I’m just saying, I think Daddy holds him responsible.”

“Well, that’s stupid. I was there and Jaxon didn’t do anything.”

“Are you sure about that? Because there’s a whole period of time you don’t remember.”

“Yeah, after I got hit by the glass, not before. Believe me, I remember everything up until that point.”

There must be something in my voice, because suddenly Macy is staring at me more intently than she ever has before, her blue eyes narrow and suspicious. “So what do you remember exactly? And why were you in Jaxon’s room anyway? The last I heard at lunch, he was avoiding you.”

The last thing I want to do is tell Macy about the tears. I don’t want her to worry about me and I definitely don’t want her thinking that she hasn’t been wonderful since I got here, because she has. “We were talking and he offered to show me the meteor shower.”

“The meteor shower? That’s the best you’ve got?”

“It’s the truth. It was gorgeous. I’ve never seen one so bright before.”

She still looks skeptical. “And how exactly were you watching this meteor shower from inside his bedroom?”

Commented [SA118]: Again this begs the question whether they want her to stay away or want to push them together?

Commented [WU119]: The dynamics of this have kind have changed in the story

“We were on the parapet *outside* his bedroom. We’d just crawled back through the window when the earthquake hit.”

“The earthquake.”

“Yeah, the earthquake. You know, that whole ground shaking thing that happened about five-thirty this afternoon. It must be an aftershock from this morning.”

“Oh, I know about the earthquake. We all felt it.”

“So why are you acting like I’m crazy?”

“I’m not. It’s just ... what were you and Jaxon doing when the earthquake hit?”

It’s my turn to stare at the wall behind her ear, but where I look doesn’t really matter because I can feel my cheeks heating up.

“Oh my God. My dad’s right. Were you—“ Her voice drops. “Were you fucking him?”

“What? No! Of course not! We were ...”

“What?”

“Kissing. He was kissing me, okay?”

“That’s it? Just kissing?”

“Of course that’s it! I met the guy less than a week ago.”

“Yeah, but ... it seems like it would have to be more than that.”

“What does?”

Macy shakes her head and stares down into her soup like it’s suddenly the most interesting thing on the planet.

“No!” I practically shout. “You don’t get to do that. I answered all your questions. You need to answer mine!”

“I know. It’s just—“ She breaks off as a knock sounds at our door.

“Who is that?” I demand.

“Probably my dad wanting to check on you again. He’s not very good at waiting on the sidelines, especially when someone he cares about is sick.”

“Ugh.” I put what’s left of my soup on my nightstand and burrow down into my covers. “Will it offend you if I pretend to be asleep? I’m really not up for talking to anyone else right now.”

“Of course not. Fake sleep away. I’ll let him get a good look at you and then I’ll kick him out.”

“Best. Roomie. Ever.”

I close my eyes and roll onto my side—face toward the wall—while Macy goes to answer the door. I can hear a deep murmur from whomever is on the other side of the doorway, but I can’t understand the words.

It must be Macy’s dad, though, because she answers, “She’s fine. She just had some soup and now she’s sleeping.”

More murmuring from that deep voice and then Macy offering, “Do you want to come in and see for yourself? Marise gave her a lot of medicine. She’s still drugged to the gills.”

There’s a little more murmuring, not much. And then Macy closes the door.

“Coast clear,” she says, but her voice sounds a little off.

“Hey, I’m sorry if I made you feel like you had to lie to your dad. If you want to call him back—“

“It wasn’t my dad.”

“Oh. Who was it then? Cam?”

“No.” She looks a little sick as she admits, “It was Jaxon.”

I spring up in bed for the third time tonight. “Jaxon? He was here? Why didn’t you let him in?”

“You told me you didn’t want to see anyone!”

“I meant your dad or Marise. Not Jaxon!” I throw back the covers and climb out of bed, searching the room for my Converse, but they are *nowhere* to be found.

“Well, how was I supposed to know that? Besides, you heard me invite him in. He’s the one who declined.”

“Because you told him I was sleeping.”

I give up on the shoe hunt and head for the door.

“Where are you going?” Macy demands.

“Where do you think?” I pull open the door. “After Jaxon.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

I charge out of our room, figuring I'll catch him a few doors down. But the hallway is completely empty. Still, he couldn't have gone far, so I take off toward the main staircase. Worse case scenario, I know where his room is.

I finally find him on the stairs, taking them three at a time. He's not alone, though—Liam and Rafael are with him and all three of them seem like they're in a really big hurry.

I should probably let them go, but he's the one who came to my room not the other way around. Which means he wanted to see me.

It's that thought that galvanizes me, that has me calling out his name as I move to the top landing.

He stops on a dime. All three of them do, and then they're all staring at me out of the same midnight black eyes. I have a second to try to absorb the direct impact of that much intensity—and it is a lot—, before Jaxon is bounding back up the stairs.

Liam and Rafael watch for a second, their faces locked in that blank look I'm coming to hate. But then they both give me a little wave—plus Rafael adds a thumbs up—before they turn away and bound down the stairs.

“What are you doing out here?” Jaxon demands, and just that quickly he's in front of me. Only his face isn't blank. It's filled with rage, his eyes an incandescent black that has shivers sliding through me for all the wrong reasons.

“Macy said you were looking for me.”

“I wasn’t looking for you. I came to make sure you were okay.”

“Oh.” I hold my arms out, do a little self-deprecating shrug. “Well, as you can see, I’m fine.”

He snorts. “Pretty sure that’s a matter of opinion.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, you look like you’re going to fall down any second. You’re absolutely insane to come running down the halls after you nearly bled to death. Go back to bed.”

“I don’t want to go back to bed. I want to talk to you about what happened this afternoon.”

Blank doesn’t describe what happens to his face. It goes beyond blank, beyond empty, until there’s absolutely nothing there. No sign at all of the Jaxon I watched the meteor shower with. Definitely no sign of the boy who kissed me until my knees buckled and my heart nearly exploded.

He looks like a stranger. A cold, emotionless stranger, one who has every intention of ignoring me. But then he finally asks, “What do you want to know?”

There are half a dozen questions swimming around in my brain, but instinct tells me I’m only going to get one shot at this. So I ask the one that has me most suspicious. “Why is my uncle so angry with you?”

“Because I didn’t protect you.”

“From an earthquake?”

“From a lot of things.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“That’s the point. There are a lot of things you don’t know. Which is why you should go back to your room and forget all about what happened earlier.”

“Forget about the earthquake?” I ask. “Or forget about you kissing me?”

“Forget about it all,” he answers.

“You know that’s not going to happen.” I reach a hand out, rest it on his elbow, hoping the contact will remind him of what it was like to touch me. Hoping it will break through the barriers he’s erected between us.

But he just shrugs my hand off, turns away. “I’ve got to go.”

“Jaxon—“

“Stay away from me, Grace.” He takes the steps three at a time and doesn’t stop until he’s on the landing. Then, without turning around, he calls up to me, “I can guarantee you won’t like what happens if you don’t. No one will.”

“Is that a threat?” I demand, more shaken than I want to admit—to him or to myself.

“I don’t make threats.” The *I don’t have to* hangs in the air between us.

Before I can respond, he puts two hands on the iron banister and vaults straight over it. I let out a strangled scream, rush to the edge of the staircase, half afraid I’ll see his mangled body down below. But not only is he not laying, broken, on the ground three stories below, he’s nowhere to be seen at all. It’s like he’s vanished into thin air.

Which is impossible.

I start to go down after him—the sane way—but I’ve barely made it down four steps before someone is calling behind me. “Hey, Grace! Where are you going?”

I turn to see Lia coming across the landing toward me. She’s dressed in all black—per usual—and looks totally badass. Also per usual.

“I wanted to talk to Jaxon, but he’s too fast for me.”

“No news there. When Jaxon doesn’t want to be caught, he’s too fast for everyone.” She reaches a hand on, rest it lightly on my shoulder. “But, Grace, honey, are you okay? You don’t look so good.”

I’m pretty sure that’s the understatement of the year, so I just kind of shake my head.

“It’s been a weird day. And a long one.”

“It always is when Jaxon is concerned,” she tells me with a laugh. “But come on, let me help you back to your room. You really do look like you’re going to collapse at any second.”

I feel like I’m going to collapse at any second, but I figure that’s no one’s business but my own. Especially in this school, where physical weakness seems like a character flaw and it’s really hard to figure out what’s going on from one second to the next.

So instead of answering her, I cast one more look down the stairs after Jaxon—to no avail—before turning to walk back the way I came.

Lia’s determined to help me though, so she wraps an arm around my waist and tries to take the brunt of my weight under her own shoulders. I don’t allow it, considering how tiny she is. But it’s still sweet of her to try.

“So, what’s going on?” she asks as we slowly make our way back to my room. “I thought I’d see you at dinner, but you weren’t there.”

“Oh, sorry. I had a little ... accident.”

“I can see that.” She eyes the bandages covering too many of my available surfaces.

“Anything serious? Because you look like you went three rounds with a polar bear. And lost.”

I laugh, because it *feels* like I went three rounds with a polar bear, but just shake my head. “A little flying glass from the earthquake earlier, no big deal.”

“Oh, right. The earthquake.” She studies me for a second. “You know, we’ve had more tremors since you got here than we’ve had in the last year. I’m beginning to think you brought them with you, California girl.”

I snort. “Pretty sure these ones have been worse than any I’ve experienced in California. Alaska is ...” I think of Jaxon. “A lot.”

“Oh, yeah? Well you know what they say about Alaska.”

“North to the Future?” I ask, quoting the state motto I found online when I was researching this state.

“More like, everything here is designed to kill you in ten seconds or less.”

“I thought that was Australia?”

“Yeah, well, I’m pretty sure it works for anyplace that begins and ends with an A.” She grins, but there’s a bite to the words that reminds me just how bad things can get here. I many have fallen out of a tree and gotten cut by some glass, but Lia lost her fiancé. And Jaxon lost his brother.

“How are you doing?” I ask, as we get closer to my room.

“Me?” She looks startled. “You’re the one who’s all cut up.”

“I didn’t mean physically. I meant ...” I take a deep breath, blow it out slowly. “About Hudson. How are you doing?”

For a second—just a second—rage flashes in her eyes. Towering, unadulterated, infinite. But then she blinks and it’s replaced with a bland, pleasant expression that is somehow a million times worse than the fury beneath it.

“I’m okay,” she says, with a strange little smile that makes my blood run cold. “I mean, I’m not good. I’ll never be good. But I’ve figured out how to say no, so that’s something.”

“To say no?”

“We talked about this before. Everyone wants me to just move on and I can’t. They tell me that nothing has to change, that Jaxon’s a perfectly good replacement—“

“Jaxon?”

“I know, it’s absurd. He and Hudson are nothing alike. And I don’t care about politics or family dynasties even if he does. I just want Hudson back.”

She looks so small when she says it, so exposed, that I feel her pain. Even as I’m reeling under the news that she and Jaxon are supposed to be together- and the implication that he’s willing to go along with it.

It doesn’t make sense. Not with the way he held me earlier. Not with the way he kissed me. He didn’t do either of those things like a guy who had another girl on his mind. He did them like a guy who was as desperate for me as I was for him. I’ve never felt anything close to that before in my whole life, and I would swear he never did either.

So what’s all this about, then? What’s Lia trying to accomplish?

I don’t have an answer to those questions and I’m, more than likely, not going to find one right now. Not when the sedative from Marise is still fogging up my brain and the loss of blood is making me feel like half my body isn’t even here.

At least we’re finally back at Macy’s and my room. I’m exhausted and more than ready to be back in my own bed. I’m also more than ready to be away from Lia, at least until I figure out if I’m being paranoid or if she’s trying to subtly warn me off Jaxon.

It won’t work. At this point, I’m in so deep I’m not sure anything would. But I do know a subtle little speech about how everyone wants her and Jaxon to be together because of family reasons definitely isn’t going to do it. No matter what she implied about Jaxon in that speech.

I reach up to knock—I was in such a hurry to get to the incredible, disappearing Jaxon Vega that I forgot my key—but the door flies open before my fist can so much as touch the wood. “There you are!” Macy exclaims. “I was just about to come looking—“

She breaks off when she sees Lia standing behind me. “Oh, hi, Lia.” She nervously smooths her hair down. “How are you?”

“Good,” Lia tells her dismissively, before turning back to me with a concerned look on her face. “Rest up, okay, Grace? I’ll come by to check on you tomorrow. Bring you a special blend of tea that will help you feel better, faster.”

“You don’t have to do that.” I cross through the beaded curtain into my room. “But I appreciate you walking me back. Thanks.”

“Of course. And the tea is no bother.” She smiles sweetly. “Get some rest.”

“I will. Thanks.”

“And thanks for bring her back. I appreciate it,” Macy tells her with a grateful smile that gets my back up.

Lia ignores her. “I can bring the tea by now if you want it, Grace.”

“I’m good.” I wave a dismissive hand at her as I flop down on my bed. “I think I’m just going to sleep.”

To prove my point, I lay down on my freshly made bed (again) and turn so I ‘m facing the wall, my back to the the door—and Lia. I know it’s rude, but right now, I just don’t care. I’m so done with this conversation, and for the moment I’m done with Lia, too. Not just because of the Jaxon thing but because I really don’t like how she treats Macy. I can’t stand how she abrupt she is, how she acts like my cousin is some annoying puppy nipping at her shoes.

There's some soft murmuring from the door—my cousin apologizing to Lia for my churlish behavior, I'm sure—and then the door closes softly.

I roll over right away, and as I do, I come face to face with the bag of cookies and fresh glass of juice Macy has put on my nightstand.

"You really are the best cousin in the world," I tell her, as I sit up. "You know that, right?"

"I do," she agrees, settling down on the bed next to me. "How are you feeling?"

"The truth?"

"Always."

"Awful. I should have listened to you." But it's stupid. And I hate it. All I did was run down the hall after Jaxon and my body feels weak, exhausted.

"No shit." She reaches for the glass of juice and holds it out to me. "Drink up, buttercup."

For the first time, I can't help thinking about how much blood I must have actually lost.

It's that thought that has me taking the glass from her and downing the juice in a couple of swallows. It's what also has me eating a stupid cookie even though my stomach is roiling and food is the last thing I want.

Macy watches me like a hawk, then smiles her approval when I manage to choke down a second cookie as well as a glass of water. Only then does she ask, "So, are you going to tell me how you left here chasing Jaxon and came back with Lia?"

"Not much to tell. Jaxon did what he always does."

"And what's that?"

"He disappeared."

Macy nods. “Yeah.”

I think about the look on Jaxon’s face when I was trying to talk to him at the top of the stairs, think about what Lia just let “slip.” Think about the way Jaxon has managed to help me every time something bad happens to me. And I think about how he finds it so easy to walk away, time and time again.

It’s enough to have my already addled brain begging for mercy.

“We should get some sleep,” Macy says and, for the first time, I realize she’s already in her pajamas. “It’s after two.”

“It’s really that late? How long was I out?”

“Long enough.” She gives me a hug before crawling off my bed. “Get some sleep. We’ll talk more about the ins and outs of Jaxon Vega’s insane brain tomorrow.”

I nod, and try to do as she suggests. But I can’t stop thinking about how late it is. And about how much time I’ve lost. I must have been out a lot longer than I thought if it’s really—I pick up my phone to check the time—two thirty-one in the morning.

What really happened in the time I was out of it? Is it exactly what Marise said? That Jaxon rushed me to her office and she drugged me so she could repair the “nick” in my artery? Or is there something more to the story, something that accounts for why my Uncle Finn is so upset?

There has to be. Nothing else makes sense. Nothing else explains why Jaxon is so upset or why Lia felt the need to do some bizarre, waifish version of not staking her claim on him even while she tried to stake her claim.

It’s these thoughts that have me staring at the ceiling until nearly three in the morning.

These thoughts that finally have me heading to the bathroom and closing the door between Macy and me.

And it's these thoughts that have me peeling back the bandage I promised I wouldn't lift for at least a few days, and staring at the cut on my neck.

Or, more precisely, the two perfectly round, perfectly spaced puncture marks about an inch below the jagged cut.

Commented [SA120]: Awesome 😊

Chapter Thirty-Four

Needless to say, there's no going to sleep after that. There's no doing anything except checking and rechecking my throat about a thousand times in the next two hours as I wait for the last of the drugs—and what I'm hoping is some kind of bizarre hallucination—to wear off.

Part of me wants to get up and go for a walk, but memories of what happened the other night are still fresh in my head. After the day I've had—and what I saw in the mirror—I'm pretty sure I'm going to lose my shit completely if anyone tries to hassle me tonight. Especially when a glance out the window reveals that the moon is still high in the sky.

Not that that should matter in a normal world, but normal has pretty much been a distant memory since I set foot in this place. Just the thought has me running my fingers over the bandage on my neck, my mind racing all over again as I try to figure out what could possibly have caused the marks on my neck.

I mean, sure, if I was living in a horror novel, there would be an obvious reason for those perfectly placed, perfectly spaced punctures. But I'm not Bram Stoker and this isn't Transylvania, so there has to be another explanation.

A snake? Two shots to my neck? A practical joke?

It has to be something. I just haven't figured out what it is, yet.

The fact that I can't help but remember Jaxon's warning about the full moon—and his sneered comment about Marc and Quinn being animals—doesn't make it any easier to be

logical. Nor does Macy's warnings that Flint and Jaxon come from different worlds, that they're just too different to ever get along.

I know I'm being crazy.

I mean, what's skating around the edges of my mind is totally absurd. Completely bonkers. There are no such thing as monsters, just people who do monstrous things.

Like this.

If Marise didn't give me a couple of shots in the neck, then this *has* to be a practical joke. Jaxon *has* to be messing with me. He has to be. There is no other reasonable explanation.

This is the idea I hold onto all through the next couple of hours, the mantra I repeat to myself over and over and over again. And still, as soon as the clock on my phone hits six a.m., I'm up and in the shower—being careful, as instructed, not to get the bandage at my neck wet.

After all, what do I know about vampire bites? Not that this is a vampire bite or anything. I'm just saying, at this point I'm taking nothing for granted.

After I'm dressed—black skirt, black tights, red polo shirt this time—I put my hair up in a bun, grab my lined hoodie and sneak out of the bedroom before Macy's alarm even goes off. Part of me wants to wake her up and ask her the question burning itself indelibly within my mind, but I don't want her to lie to me. I'm also not sure I want her to tell me the truth.

Jaxon on the other hand ... If he lies to me, you'd better believe I'm going to stake him through his fangy black heart. And yes, I know that makes no sense. I just don't happen to care at this exact moment.

I march through the school like a woman on a mission. The fact that I'm also still a little dizzy—just how much blood did I *lose*, anyway—makes things particularly interesting, but there's no way I'm laying around in bed, waiting to talk to him, for one second longer.

I make it up to the tower in about five minutes flat—which pretty much has to be some kind of record considering it’s all the way at the other end of the castle. But when I rush through the alcove to pound on Jaxon’s bedroom door, there’s no answer.

I keep pounding, and when that doesn’t work, I text him. And call him. And then pound some more. Because this can’t be happening right now. He can’t really not be here when I most need answers from him.

Except apparently he can. Damn it.

Frustrated, pissed off, and more worried than I like to admit, I drop down on one of the overstuffed chairs in his reading alcove and stare at the now boarded up window that started all this so I can pretend not to notice that the rug that was here yesterday is now gone. Then I lean back and prepare to wait Jaxon Vega out,

Fifteen minutes later and I’m pretty much climbing the walls. Half an hour later and I’m firing off more than a few obnoxious texts to the raging jackass. And forty-five minutes later I’m contemplating burning down the whole freaking tower ... at least until Mekhi walks in, sleepy eyed and amused.

“What are you smiling at,” I demand none too politely.

“You look cute when you’re grumpy.”

“I am not grumpy.”

“Oh, right. You’re pissed off beyond belief and more than capable of ripping Jaxon’s fat, black heart out of his chest and stomping on it?” He quotes my most outrageous text back to me, I assume to embarrass me. But I am beyond being embarrassed. I mean, I have fang marks in my neck. Fang marks.

“Exactly,” I answer with a glare. “Not to paraphrase Sylvia Plath or anything.”

“Not to paraphrase her *badly*, don’t you mean?”

“Keep it up and I’m going to get pissed off at you, too.” He smiles, but before he can say something that makes me want to punch him in his stupid, ridiculously pretty face, I demand, “Where’s Jaxon? Any why is he hiding from me?”

“He’s not hiding from you.”

“Oh, really?” I walk over and ceremoniously knock on his door. Once again, there’s no answer. “Pretty sure he is.”

“Really? And why would he be hiding from you exactly?” Mekhi crosses his arms over his chest and grins at me, brows raised and head tilted.

“Because of this.” I reach up and rip the bandage off my throat, turning my head so Mekhi can see what I saw.

I take a perverse kind of satisfaction in watching the grin drop from his face. In watching his eyes widen and his face go slack with shock. “What the hell! Who bit you?”

Of all the things I thought he might say, that question didn’t even crack the top ten thousand. “What do you mean, who? Jaxon bit me. Obviously.”

“Jaxon?” He shakes his head, a little wild-eyed. “No, I’m pretty sure that’s not how that went down.”

“Of course it is. I was up here, got cut by glass and Jaxon bit me. I’m sure of it.”

“You remember that happening? Just like that? Him biting you?”

“Well, no.” I’m pretty sure I’m as wild-eyed as he is at this point. “But if it *wasn’t* him, the who the hell who was it?”

“I have no idea.” He pulls out his phone and fires off a series of texts.

“I swear to God, if you’re messing with me, Mekhi ... If this is all just some great, big practical joke you guys cooked up, I’m going to *murder* you all. We’re clear about that, right?”

“Crystal.” His phone vibrates with several return texts and his face gets even more grim as he reads them. “It definitely wasn’t Jaxon.”

“How do you know he’s not just saying that?”

“Because Jaxon doesn’t lie to me. And because he is currently freaking the fuck out.” His phone buzzes again and he reads the newest messages before continuing, “He wants you to sit tight. He’s on his way back. He’ll be here in a few hours.”

“On his way back?” My head is actually threatening to blow up. Like, it seriously might just explode right here, right now and then it won’t matter who made these marks on me, or why. “Where exactly did he go?”

“The mountains.”

“The mountains?! You mean Denali?”

Mekhi doesn’t look at me when he answers, “Further than that.”

“Further than ... how much further are we talking about here?”

He shakes his head. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t you tell me not to worry about it.” I reach over and grab a handful of dreads. And then I pull. Hard. “I’m the one with fang marks in my neck from some asshole’s practical joke and Jaxon is the last one who saw me besides the medical professional. So I’m going to worry until he gets back here and explains this to me. Okay?”

“Okay, okay!” He grimaces as he—very carefully—disentangles my hands from his dreads. “Geez, woman. You definitely know how to make a guy hurt.”

“Yeah, well, you might want to pass that along to your mountain traversing friend.”

I'm completely fed up with both of them at this point—not to mention the entire situation-- so screw it. Just screw it. I push off the chair and head for the door.

Except Mekhi gets there before me—the boy sure can move fast when he wants to—and blocks my path. “Hey. Where are you going?”

“Back to my room to get my stuff. I have class.” I move to go around him, but he shifts to block my path.

“I told you Jaxon wants you to stay put. Just ... I don't know, grab a book and a blanket and curl up by the fire.” He gestures to the empty fireplace.

“There's no fire.”

“I'll build one. It'll take me five minutes, I promise.”

“Mekhi.” I speak slowly and in the most reasonable tone I can manage, but I can see that just makes him warier. Smart boy.

“Yes, Grace?”

“If Jaxon wants me to stay put, maybe he should have done the same. As it is, he's on some mountain God only knows where doing God only knows what and I'm here with inexplicable *fang* marks in my neck that happened when I was *unconscious*. So I assume you can see why I don't actually give a *damn* what Jaxon wants right now.”

“Umm, yeah. I absolutely can see that.” He gives me the grin that I'm sure normally gets him everything he wants in life and more, but I refuse to cave. Not now and not over this. “How about we compromise? You go back to your room and chill until Jaxon gets here? That way you'll be safe and then you two can figure this out together.”

“You really think I need to hide from some moron with a staple remover or a pet snake?”

“A staple remover didn’t make those marks, Grace. And neither did a snake. I think you know that or you wouldn’t have been up here pounding on Jaxon’s door at six in the morning.”

His acknowledgement of the elephant in the room—or should I say the monster in the room—has a kind of calmness washing over me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. Maybe it’s the medicine, maybe I’m going into shock, or maybe I’m just relieved to have someone finally being real with me. Whatever it is, I take a deep breath and hold onto it with both hands as my very first conversation with Jaxon plays through my head. *There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.* And then I ask—because I have to hear it out loud-- “So what did make these marks, Mekhi?”

For long seconds, he doesn’t answer. And then, just when I’ve given up on him speaking at all, he says, “The truth is, Grace, sometimes the most obvious answer really is the right one.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Mekhi and I don't talk after that—except for him insisting on escorting me back to my room. I mean, there really isn't much to say considering I can't decide if I should trust him or not. I don't know this guy—sure, Jaxon trusts him, but Jaxon is currently MIA so that's not exactly a ringing endorsement.

The fact that he's been blowing up my phone with text messages for the last fifteen minutes doesn't matter much to me either. I texted him earlier and the only response I got was him sending Mekhi. So now he can ask Mekhi what he wants to know about me, because I am *not* answering. Childish? Maybe. Prudent? Absolutely. Because in the mood I'm in, I'm afraid I'm going to say something I'll regret. Better to calm down and talk to him in person when he gets back. And also, if he tries to lie to me right now, I'll burn whatever is growing between us straight to the freaking ground.

Mekhi tries to start conversations several times on the way back to my room, but I'm not having it. I don't ignore him, but I don't participate either. It doesn't take long for him to get the hint.

Still, the silence between us might just be the most awkward silence of my life, so I expect him to cut and run the second he delivers me to my door. Instead, he waits around while I unlock it.

When he doesn't, I tell him flat out, "I'm not inviting you in," all without bothering to so much as turn my head to look at him.

“I don’t expect you to.” But the moment I get the door open, he slaps his palm flat against it and pushes inside. He doesn’t go far, just steps through the curtain of beads and stops right over the threshold. But how far doesn’t matter when he is—very definitely—inside my room, where I do *not* want him.

“Hey! What are you doing?” I grab his arm and start trying to tug him back through the door.

He just shrugs me off. “Don’t worry. I’m not staying.” Then he grins at my cousin.

“Hey, Macy.”

“Hi, Mekhi.” She’s still bleary eyed and in her pajamas, which probably accounts for why she doesn’t notice the power struggle going on between us. The cup of coffee in her hand attests to the fact that we didn’t wake her up, but I’m just glad she wasn’t in her underwear or something. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. He was just leaving.” I shoot him a warning look.

He doesn’t even pretend to look shamefaced when he says. “Jaxon doesn’t want her going to class today.”

“Okay.” She doesn’t even pause.

“Okay?” I demand. “Jaxon doesn’t get to tell me—“

“My dad already told her teachers she wouldn’t be there after what happened yesterday. Great minds and all that.” She scowls at me. “You’re supposed to be in bed.”

“You going to stay with her?” Mekhi asks before I can defend myself.

“Yeah, absolutely. Why? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know yet. But I’m pretty sure that’s what Jaxon aims to find out.”

Macy’s face tightens. “Is there something wrong.”

“I don’t know yet.” Mekhi nods toward me. “I’ll let her tell you about it.”

“You know I’m standing right here in front of you, right? Which means you can talk *to* me instead of over me.”

Mekhi’s brows hit his forehead. “Oh, really? Because I’m pretty sure I already tried that.”

“You know what? Bite me.” I make an oops face. “Oh right, I forgot. Someone already did.”

Macy whips her head around like it’s on springs. “What did you say?”

“She knows, Mace.”

If possible, my cousin turns even paler. “What exactly does she know, Mekhi?”

“You can go now,” I tell him, grabbing onto the edge of the door and using it to back him out of the room.

“Look, Grace, I’m really sorry,” he says right before I get the door closed.

I pause. “Did you bite me?”

“What? No! Of course not.”

“Then you’ve got nothing to apologize for.” I sigh as some of the rage drains away. “I’m not mad at you personally, Mekhi. I’m just mad.”

“I get that.” He looks hopeful. “Does this mean you’re not mad at Jaxon either?”

“Oh, no. I’ve got *all* the anger stored up for Jaxon, so don’t you dare go telling him otherwise.”

“Believe me, I won’t.” Mekhi grins. “The last thing I’m interested in doing is getting in the middle of that argument. Besides, it might be time someone takes my boy down a peg or two.”

“More like twelve,” I answer with a snort. “No go away. I have stuff to do.”

With that, I close the door right in his face. And now that it’s just Macy and me, everything suddenly gets a whole shit-ton more real.

I take a second to gather my wits, to try to formulate what I want to say. But Macy jumps in before I can do much more than have an OMG moment.

“Grace, it’s not—“

I turn to face her. “I’m going to ask you one question, Macy. Just one. And I want you to be totally honest with me. Because if you’re not ... if you’re not, I’m going to pack up all of my shit and go back to California. I’ll stay with Heather, I’ll file for emancipation, I’ll do whatever I have to do. But, I swear, you will never see or hear from me again. Got it?”

If it’s possible, she grows even more pale. Plus if her eyes got any bigger they’d take over her entire face. But that doesn’t stop her from nodding and asking quietly, “Okay.”

“Are you a vampire?”

“What?” She shakes her head vehemently. “No.”

The answer has me sagging in relief ... at least until I realize one question isn’t going to cut it. I have *dozens*.

“Is your father a vampire?”

“No.”

“Was *my* father a vampire?”

“Absolutely not.” She reaches a hand out to me. “Oh Grace, is that what you’re afraid of?”

I blow out a long breath as the biggest, tightest knot in my stomach unwinds. “At this moment, I don’t know what I’m afraid of, Macy. But since you’re not acting like I’m insane for

asking these questions—and I have a perfect bite mark on my neck at this very moment—I assume that means vampires are real.”

“They are, yes.”

“And they go to this school.”

She nods. “Yes.”

“And Jaxon is a vampire.”

“I really think you should talk to him about that, Grace. I mean—“

“Macy!”

She just looks at me, her face miserable.

“I thought we were friends, not just family.”

“We are. Of course we are.”

“Then tell me the truth. Is. Jaxon. Vega. A. Vampire?”

“Yes.”

I was expecting it—I was—and still it explodes over me like a grenade. My knees go out from under me and I hit the floor, hard.

“Grace!” Macy’s next to me in the space between one second and the next. “Are you okay?”

“I have no idea.” I close my eyes, lean my head back against the door, which is conveniently close to where I dropped. “That’s why he can be outside without a jacket.”

“Yes.”

“So, that means Lia ...”

“Yes.”

I nod. “Flint?”

“What? No. Flint’s definitely not a vamp.”

I close my eyes as relief sweeps through me, at least until she continues, “He’s a ...”

“What?” I open one eye. “He’s a what?”

“I’m not sure you’re ready.”

“Will I ever be ready? Finish the sentence please. He’s a ...”

“Dragon.”

Now I open both eyes. “Say that again?”

She sighs. “He’s a dragon, Grace. Flint is a dragon.”

“Of course he is. You mean he’s got—“ I hold my arms up and kind of flap them up and down.

“Yes, he’s got wings.”

“And ... fire?” I answer my own question. “Of course he does. With a name like Flint, how could he not?”

My brain is imploding. I can feel it actually turning to mush and folding in on itself under the weight of all this new information. Even worse, something tells me we aren’t done yet. Which is probably what leads me to snark, “And that makes you what? A fairy?”

“I’m not a fairy.”

“Not a fairy, not a vampire, not a ... dragon?”

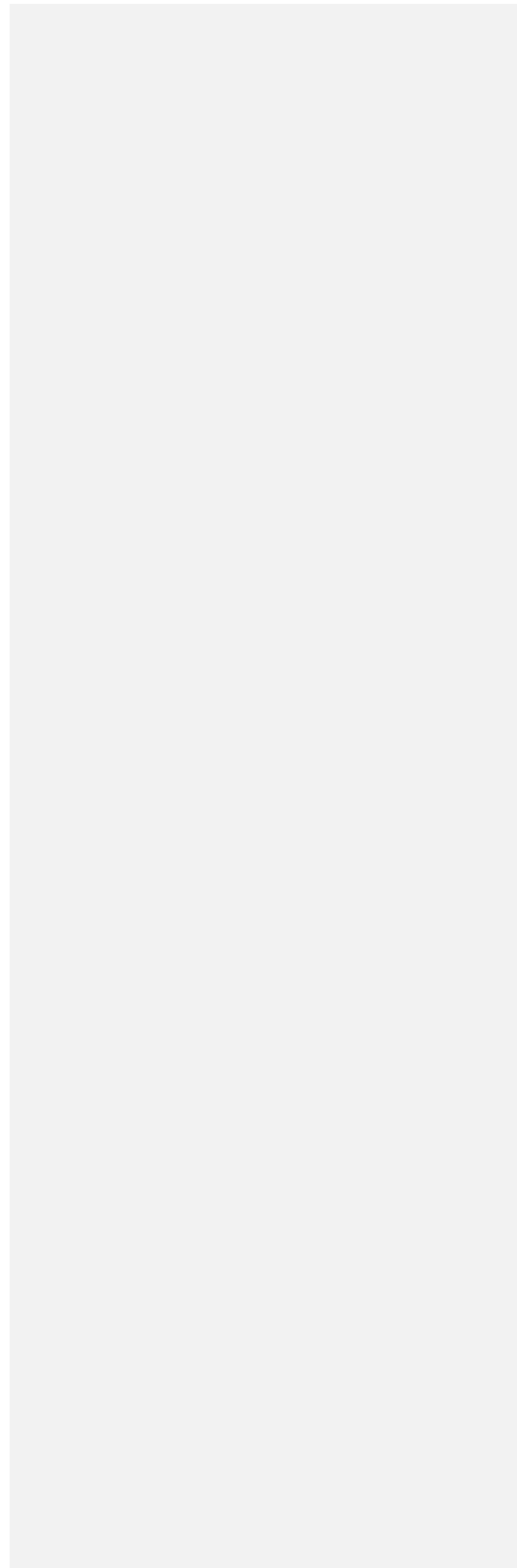
Macy sighs. “I’m a witch, Grace.”

I run her words back through my head another time or five, but still. They make the least amount of sense of anything I’ve heard this afternoon. “I’m sorry?”

“You heard me.” Now she’s smirking at me. “And you want to know something else?”

“At this point, no. I don’t. Not even a little bit. I’m done. My brain is—“

“You should have been one, too.”



Chapter Thirty-Six

Her words go off like a bomb inside of me. They can't be right—*she* can't be right. I mean, the whole idea is absurd.

"I'm sorry, but you just blew it." Not for the first time in the last ten minutes, I stare at my cousin like she's lost her mind. Or, perhaps more appropriately, as if she's taken to riding a broom around our dorm room in a pointy black hat.

"Whatever prank this is, whatever weird ass mass hallucination you have going on here, you took it one step too far with that claim. Because I may be a lot of things, but I am not, nor have I ever been, a witch."

I wave my hand in a magic wand kind of gesture. "See, nothing happens. No glass dissolving and sending you tumbling into a snake pit. No ruby red slippers to click together and take me home. No poisoned apple or magic mirror. So, no, definitely not a witch."

Macy laughs. She actually laughs. "I'm not saying you are a witch. I'm just saying that if your dad hadn't fallen in love with your mom and gotten banished from the coven, you probably would be."

"Wait a minute. You're saying my dad *was* a witch?"

"Yeah, just like my dad. And me. It's a family thing."

I'm pretty sure my mind is imploding now. Like just, full on caving on in itself. "I don't understand. How could my dad be a witch and I not know it?"

“Because they stripped his powers when he fell for your mom. Witches aren’t supposed to marry ordinary humans—weaken the bloodlines. So if a witch falls in love with one, they lose their powers.”

I finally understand what the expression, the mind boggles, means. “So, my dad was a witch but then he wasn’t a witch. And that’s why I’m not a witch?”

“Pretty much. Yeah.”

“Are you screwing with me, Macy?” I ask, because I have to. “I mean, you have to be messing with me, right?”

“I’m not messing with you, Grace.”

“Are you sure? Like ... really sure?”

She leans over and hugs me. “I’m really, really sure.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured you were.” I just sit here for a minute, trying to absorb what she’s telling me. “And my dad was okay with that? Losing all his powers?”

“From what my dad says, he really loved your mom. So yeah, he was.”

“He did love her. They loved each other a ridiculous amount.” I can’t help but smile a little as I remember. “They were totally the parents who couldn’t keep their hands off each other. I used to tell them how gross they were. But honestly it was kind of nice, you know. To see that two people could love each other that much after so many years.”

“I bet.” Macy sighs wistfully.

“So,” I say, trying to act like I’m okay with everything I’ve just learned. “I’m related to witches, huh?”

“Yeah. Crazy, right?”

“A little bit.” I eye her speculatively. “So, can you fly around the room or something?”

“To prove I’m not messing with you?” she asks with an arch of her brow.

“Maybe.” Definitely.

“No, I can not fly around the room.”

“Why not?” I ask, strangely disappointed.

“You know this is real life and not a book, right? Things like that don’t actually happen.”

“Well, what kind of witch are you if you can’t do something an eleven year old kid can do?”

“The kind that doesn’t come from JK Rowling’s brilliant imagination.” She waves a hand toward the electric tea kettle that always sits on top of the fridge. It starts steaming and whistling instantly.

I try to tell myself that she had it turned on the whole time, but a quick glance reveals that it’s not even plugged in. Because of course it isn’t. Why would it be?

She doesn’t stop with the tea kettle though. She waves her hand again, murmurs something under her breath and I watch in fascination as she makes a cup of tea without ever leaving her spot on the floor.

“That’s a real cup of tea?” I ask her as it comes floating across the room toward us.

“Of course it is.” She snatches the cup out of mid-air, then holds it out to me. “Want a sip?”

At this point, I’m pretty sure I’d rather drink rat poison. “I think I’ll pass, thanks.”

She shrugs, then lifts the tea to her own lips and blows a few times before taking a small sip.

“I can’t believe this is happening. I just ... can’t believe it.”

“Sure you can. Otherwise you wouldn’t be so freaked out.”

“I’m not freaked out. I mean, yeah, I’m on the floor and I can’t feel my legs, but other than that I think I’m handling the whole thing fairly well.”

“Of course you are.” She grins. “Except for the fact that every word that’s come out of your mouth for the last ten minutes has squeaked.”

“That’s not—“ I pause and clear my throat because maybe—just maybe—I’m a little high pitched. “What do you expect? You and Mekhi are trying to convince me that I’m living in the middle of a less bloody version of Game of Thrones. And winter is already here.”

Macy laughs, then raises a brow. “You don’t actually believe high school is a less bloody version of Game of Thrones do you? I mean, how many times have you almost died since you got here?”

“Yeah, but those were accidents. I mean ... they were accidents, right?”

“Probably.” She inclines her head. “Yeah, they were. But Jaxon’s freaking out and he never freaks out, so ...”

“He’s freaking out because someone *bit* me! Someone who isn’t him, I mean.” I pull off the bandage for a second time, and turn my head so she can see the puncture marks just below my cut.

“Oh! Is that what this is all about?” She sounds way too relieved considering I just told her some vampire sunk his or her teeth into me without my permission. Then again, do they ever ask permission before they bite? And if so, who would be stupid enough to say yes? One more question to add to the tally of about a hundred or so I have waiting for Jaxon. “I can explain everything.”

“Oh, well, okay then.” I make an expansive go ahead gesture, then continue, “Please, feel free. Explain away.”

“Marise did that to you.”

“The school nurse?” I don’t know why that shocks me so much, but it really, really does.

“Marise is a vampire, too?”

“She is. And she didn’t have a choice. She had to bite you if she had any hope of repairing your arterial tear.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “I thought it was a nick?”

“It was a tear. And you almost died. You would have died, in fact, if Jaxon hadn’t been there and done what he did to save you.”

“You mean running me to the nurse’s office?” The squeak is back.

“I mean sealing your wound so you wouldn’t bleed out while he got you to the nurse’s office.” She puts her cup of tea aside and reaches for my hands. Then as she’s squeezing tight, she continues, “Vampire venom has a lot of different properties, depending on what the vampire intends. Jaxon used his to seal your wound, but from what I understand, he was a little too thorough and Marise couldn’t get through it to actually suture the wound.”

“So she bit me and got through that way?” I try not to shudder at the thought of her teeth sinking into my neck. When I thought it was Jaxon, it *freaked* me out but didn’t *gross* me out. I can’t say the same about having anyone else’s teeth in me, though ...

“She bit you and injected her own venom, using the anti-coagulant properties instead of the coagulant ones. It was enough to break down what Jaxon had done and let her heal you properly.”

“So vampires can just do that? Just ... override each other’s bites?”

“Keep in mind, I’m not a vampire, but--”

“Right. You’re just a witch.”

She ignores my interruption. “I don’t think so. At least, not normally. But she’s an older, more mature vampire and she’s also a healer, which gives her extra abilities in times like that. It’s why she’s the school nurse. But, from what my dad said, it still took a lot of skill and venom to undue what Jaxon had done. That boy was determined to save you.”

Not going to lie, hearing that feels good. But I’m still mad at him, even though right now, I’m not sure why. Except ... “So what you’re saying is that I currently have I vampires’ venom running through my blood right now?”

Macy settles back with a laugh and an eye roll. “Trust you to focus on that.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s pretty hard not to focus on it when every vampire movie I’ve ever seen is playing in the back of my head. I mean, I’m not going to ...” I mime getting fangs.

“Become a vampire?”

“Well, yeah.”

“No, Grace, you’re not about to sprout fangs and start sucking people’s blood. You’re fine. In fact, the only reason you’re alive is because a vampire was with you. And not just any vampire, but Jaxon. Most of the others would have had a really hard time stopping themselves from ...”

“Drinking me dry?” I finish the thought she very obviously didn’t want to.

“Yeah, that’s not how I would have put it.”

“Doesn’t make it any less true, though, does it?”

She doesn’t answer, just grabs her tea cup and stands up.

I follow her, unwilling to just let her walk away right now when I still have so many questions. About vampires. And witches. And dragons, for God’s sake. How can *dragons* exist and the rest of the world not know about it?

Speaking of which ... “There aren’t any other creatures here that you forgot to mention, right? No zombies, no unicorns, no—“

“Werewolves.

“Exactly. No werewolves.”

“I wasn’t saying no, Grace. I was answering your question.”

“Oh.” I swallow. “So ... vampires, dragons, witches and werewolves.”

“Well, if you’re going to get technical, they’re wolf shifters really, more than werewolves.”

By all means, let’s get technical at this late date. “And the difference is?”

“Werewolves need the full moon. Wolf shifters can shift any time. Same with the dragons.”

“So Flint can be a dragon anytime he wants?”

“Flint *is* a dragon, all the time. He can shift between his dragon and human form, whenever he wants.”

“I have so many questions.” And most of them start and end with *how is this possible?*

“I know.” She leans over and gives me a hug.

“Marc and Quinn?” I think about the shirtless guys who tried to throw me out in the snow the first night. “Wolf shifters?”

“Yeah. Who apparently do get a little extra nuts around the full moon ..,”

“Apparently ... But they listened to Jaxon, even though he’s a vampire.”

Macy laughs. “I’m sorry, but haven’t you noticed? Everyone listens to Jaxon, whether they’re vampires or not.”

Like in my Brit Lit class yesterday, when no one would come in. “Why is that?”

“It’s kind of a long story, which I’m happy to tell you. But I’m seriously starving. Can I answer the rest of them over breakfast in the dining hall?”

“Yeah, of course. But I thought you told Mekhi we weren’t going to leave the room until Jaxon gets here?”

“I told him we weren’t going to class. And if the bite on your neck is what’s got him all upset, then it’s no problem. We know where the bite came from and we know that it’s harmless. So we’ll just go grab a quick breakfast and be back in the room before Jaxon even gets here.”

She’s right. I know she’s right. Plus, it’s not like I’m going to ask how high every time Jaxon expects me to jump. Everyone else at this school might listen to him, but I’m not some supernatural creature. I’m human, and now’s as good a time as any for Jaxon to figure out I don’t play by the same weird, convoluted, *terrifying* rules everyone else around here does.

“Sounds good,” I tell her. “Turns out, I’m suddenly really hungry, too.”

“I bet. Massive blood loss will do that to a girl,” Macy says as she disappears into the bathroom, a pair of school sweats and P.E. t-shirt in her hands.

She comes out two minutes later, and not only is she dressed, but her hair is slicked back in an adorable style and her face looks like she spent half an hour putting on make-up in front of the mirror.

“What happened to you?” I demand.

“Oh, just a little glamour.” She wiggles in front of her face. “And can I just say how glad I am that you know now? My life is going to get so much easier.”

“Apparently.” Suddenly self-conscious, I grab a lipgloss off my dresser, swipe it over my lips before we head to the door. “So, how do you do that glamour thing?”

“Oh, it’s just a little trick all witches know.”

“Yeah, well, flying’s still cooler,” I tease.

“Maybe.” She holds the door open for me. “But there’s a lot I can do that you don’t know about yet.”

“Like what?” I ask, totally fascinated.

“Pretty sure that’s for me to know and you to find out ...”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The halls are crowded as we make our way to the dining hall—it's thirty-five minutes before first period starts and apparently everyone in the school tries to eat in the same half an hour period. Which makes sense. I mean, if I'm not worrying about bizarre fang marks or trying to fit in at a new school, I don't want to get up one second sooner than I have to either.

Still, now that I know, everything feels even weirder than normal. People move by us, jostling Macy, bumping into me, or even skirting us entirely the same as they did yesterday. But today all I can do is look at them and wonder. Vampire? Shifter? Witch? *Dragon*? It's insane, like falling into the pages of a fantasy novel ... or a horror movie, depending on how this all goes.

I kind of assign monsters to people based on characteristics they exhibit, but I have no idea if I'm right or not. For example, the really athletic ones who bound down the hall with all the energy, I figure must be wolves. But Jaxon moves hella fast when he wants to, so maybe I'm completely wrong. I want to ask Macy, just to see if any of my guesses are right. But it seems rude to whisper about people's—Race? Species? Identity? Whatever I'm Supposed To Call It? —in the middle of the hall where anyone can hear. Or, for that matter, to whisper about it at all.

But at the same time, don't I kind of need to know? Like if I cut my finger in front of a dragon, I figure it won't matter at all. But what happens if I do it in front of a vampire? Do I need to run or is everything going to be okay?

And why are vampires even in the dining hall if they drink blood? I mean, I saw Jaxon eat that strawberry at the welcome party, but he didn't touch any of the food at breakfast yesterday. And if he does drink blood regularly, where does he get it? Where do any of the vampires get it? I mean, short of kidnapping a fully stocked bloodmobile every day—which seems an impossible feat anywhere let alone in the middle of freaking Alaska-- where do they get the blood?

More importantly, do I really want to know the answer to that question?

Also, I've seen Jaxon and Lia outside during the day. I mean, it wasn't super sunny, but it was definitely not pitch black, either. So does that mean the whole vampires can't be in the sun thing is a myth? If so, there's a lot of stories throughout history that got it wrong.

It's so confusing. Like, insanely confusing, especially since there's a part of me that still thinks Macy and Mekhi are just messing with me. I mean, yeah, I saw what she did with that teacup, but still ... Witches? Dragons? *Vampires*?

I'm really beginning to miss my alien theory.

Especially when we step in the cafeteria and—surprise, surprise—everyone is looking at me. Per usual. I thought it was because I was the new girl. Now I can't help but think it's because I'm the *human* girl. Which then leads to thoughts about whether or not any of them are thinking about eating me.

Do wolf shifters eat humans? Or is it just vampires? What about dragons? What do they eat?

I really hope human isn't on their delicacy list. Then again, wishing hasn't gotten me much in the last month. I can't expect it to get me this, either.

"You know what?" I tell Macy as we make our way to the buffet table at the front of the dining hall. "Maybe I should go back to the room."

"What's wrong?" She searches my face with a concerned frown. "Are you feeling dizzy? Or weak?"

"I'm feeling ... out of place."

"Oh." Understanding dawns. "They're the same people you went to class with yesterday. The same people you had a snowball fight with the day before that."

"The same people who have been watching me since I got here. I thought they'd be over it by now, that they'd get used to me. But they're *never* going to get used to having me here."

"I hate to be the one to break it to you, Grace, but the stares you're getting these days have way more to do with Jaxon than they do with you."

I don't bother to try to hide my confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's a big deal here. Obviously. And he's shown an interest in you. Which makes *you* a big deal. It also makes you the person eighty percent of the female population want to murder."

"Because they're jealous, right? Not because—"

"Yes, Grace." She rolls her eyes. "Because they're jealous. They want to be where you are."

"Bandaged up and sore, with a weak ankle and a vampire bite in my neck?" I joke.

"Exactly," she deadpans back. "Now can we please get in line? It's chocolate croissant day and they go fast."

“Of course.” I gesture for her to precede me. “Who am I to get between you and a chocolate croissant?”

“A question every guy in the place asks himself at least once on Wednesdays,” a familiar voice says from right behind me.

“Hi, Flint.” I turn to him with a little bit of a forced smile. Not because his being a dragon makes me like him less, but because his being a dragon FREAKS ME OUT.

“Hey, New Girl.” He looks me over. “Gotta say, I’m not crazy about your new look.”

I touch the bandages self-consciously. “Yeah, me neither.”

“I bet.” He reaches out, rubs a reassuring hand up and down my non-damaged arm. “You don’t look so good. Why don’t you go sit down and let me bring you a plate?”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t have to. But I still feel guilty about the whole fall out of the tree thing. This will help me make up for it.” He gives me a beseeching look.

“What do you have to feel guilty about? You saved me from getting hurt worse.” For the first time, I wonder if the reason he didn’t get hurt at all is because he’s a dragon. If so, then I’m glad he isn’t human, glad that he wasn’t in jeopardy because of me.

I look up at him with his incredibly handsome face, his bright green eyes, his charming grin, and wonder if I’m seeing the dragon or the human. Or maybe I’m seeing both. Who knows?

And then he raises his brows at me and I wonder why it even matters when Flint—whatever and whoever he is—is my friend.

“Thank you again, for that, by the way. I really appreciate it.”

“Stop it, Grace. You wouldn’t even have been up that tree if it wasn’t for me.”

“I think we’re just going to have to agree to disagree on this,” I tell him.

“Fine. We’ll agree to disagree ... as soon as you let me bring you breakfast.” He gives me his most charming grin, the one that would probably knock my socks off if I hadn’t seen Jaxon first. But I did see Jaxon, and now he’s pretty much all I *can* see, vampire or not.

I start to argue with him some more—I’m sick of people treating me like an invalid--but we’re holding up the line. And since the last thing I want to do is make an even bigger spectacle of myself, I just give in.

“Fine. I’ll take a chocolate croissant if you can get one—“

“Oh, I’ll get one,” he assures me.

“I have no doubt. And some fruit, if there is any.”

“Sure. And what do you want to drink?”

I grin. “Surprise me.”

His eyes darken and for a second—just a second—something flashes in them. But before I can figure it out, it’s gone and the lightness is back. And so is the teasing as he tugs on one of my curls and says, “Believe me, I intend to.”

Then he grabs both my shoulders and turns me around. “I’m sitting over there.” He points toward the end of the center table. “There’s a few extra seats. Why don’t you head that way and I’ll be over as soon as I get our plates?”

“Sounds good.” I do as he says, stopping just long enough to let Macy know where we’ll be sitting.

Flint watches me the whole time, but I figure that’s because he doesn’t trust me to actually sit down. But what he doesn’t realize is that when the alternative is standing around awkwardly waiting for him while everyone looks on, it takes all my self-control not to run to my seat.

Especially when I see Mekhi and Luka heading my way, dark frowns on their usually relaxed faces. I think about waiting for them, but I don't really want to hear what they have to say. And I don't want to explain to them why Macy and I decided it would be okay to come to the dining hall—at least not in front of most of the student body.

So instead of waiting for them to catch up, I do what any girl who doesn't want to deal with a boy would do—I take off toward another boy's territory. In this case, the table where Flint and his friends are sitting.

Cowardly? Maybe. Prudent? Probably. The path of least resistance? Abso-freaking-lutely. I'm not ashamed to admit that I could do with a little less resistance and a little more easy in my life. Especially today.

I'm pretty sure it would have worked, too—the Order and Flint dislike each other that much—except for the terrible wrenching sound that splits the air directly above me just as I get close to Flint's part of the table ...

Chapter Thirty-Eight

It's a horrific noise and I glance up, trying to figure out what could possibly be making it, just in time to see the biggest crystal chandelier in the place pull free of the plate holding it to the ceiling. I have about half a second to think, *oh shit*, and then someone is there, slamming their body into mine.

The hit knocks the breath out of me—or maybe it's the subsequent slam, face first, into the nearest wall that does it. Either way, it's a struggle to get my breath back, especially since there's a long, lean male body pressed against my back, his arms caging me in on either side.

At the same time there's a huge crash. For a second all I can hear is the tinkle of glass as it shatters and flies, hitting everything in its path. The boy behind me grunts and wraps himself more tightly around me and that's when I know. I may not be able to draw a full breath yet, but there's enough oxygen in my body for my brain to function again. And my newly functioning brain registers one thing above all others-- that the guy currently wrapped around me is *Jaxon*.

"Are you okay?" he demands, as soon as the glass stops flying.

I don't answer him—I can't. My lungs still aren't working at full capacity yet and neither is my voice.

I try to nod my head, but that's obviously not good enough for him because he's whirling me around, his hands skimming over my body as he orders, "Answer me, Grace! Are you all right?"

“I’m fine,” I finally manage to gasp out. But that’s when I get my first good look at him and realize that while I may be okay, he very definitely isn’t. “You’re bleeding.”

“I’m fine.” He shrugs it off. “Does anything hurt?”

“I’m not the one who’s injured.” I run a light finger over the right side of his face, pausing at the bloody parts. “What are you even doing here? I thought it would take a couple more hours for you to get back.”

His dark eyes smolder at me—and not in a good way. “Obviously.”

I don’t know what to say to that—and he doesn’t look like he’s in the mood to listen anyway—so I reach into my backpack and pull out the first aid kit I keep in the front pocket. It’s a habit I picked up after my parents died in the car accident—stupid, since it would have taken more than a first aid kit to save them with their injuries. Still, Tessa’s mom suggested it when I was freaking out right after they died, and for whatever reason it calmed me down. Today’s the first day it’s actually going to come in handy, though.

“Sit down,” I tell him, and when he doesn’t move, I put my hands on his chest and gently push.

He doesn’t budge.

“Please,” I ask, moving a hand up to cup his uninjured but scarred cheek. “You’re hurt. Let me take care of you.”

For long seconds he still doesn’t move, just stares at me, unblinking. It sends chills down my spine—I don’t think I’ve ever seen Jaxon this furious. Which ... fine. He can be as angry as he wants as long as he lets me treat his wounds. “Please,” I say again, and this time I accompany it with a little shove to his chest.

He doesn't say anything but slowly, grudgingly, he allows me to guide him to the nearest chair.

Macy makes it to me right around the time I get Jaxon settled. Tears are pouring down her face as she throws her arms around my neck. "Oh my God, Grace! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I tell her even as I try to disengage from her hug. What is wrong with her and Jaxon? Can't they tell that he's the one who's hurt? Maybe it's not a big deal when vampires bleed, I don't know. But it's a big deal to me.

I pull an antibacterial wipe out of the pack and press it gently to his cheek. He doesn't wince. In fact, he doesn't move at all—just stares stonily ahead. Still, I clean the wound carefully, making sure there's no glass in it before squeezing ointment onto his cheek and following it with a band-aid. I have a moment of wondering if he needs the ointment—can vampires even get infections? But he doesn't stop me, and neither does Macy, so I figure even if it's not necessary, at least it won't hurt anything.

By now adults are swarming the dining hall, teachers checking for injuries and trying to clear students out of the room as quickly as possible. It's a surprisingly quiet affair, one I don't pay much attention to as I move on to the jagged cut on Jaxon's arm.

I'm pretty sure it looks worse than it is, considering he hasn't bled much and it's already clotting. I wonder if maybe their venom isn't the only thing with a quick coagulant in it. Still, I clean it as thoroughly as I did his cheek. I have to admit I'm a little surprised no teacher has come by and tried to bundle him off to the nurse, but maybe there are people with worse injuries and I just don't realize it.

It's not until I finish bandaging his arm and step back that I realize there's a very good reason no one has tried to take Jaxon for medical attention. It's the same reason that the room is so quiet despite everything that's happened.

The five other members of the Order have surrounded us.

They're several yards away, but they have definitely formed a perimeter around Jaxon and me, one that no one but Macy has been able to get through. Not that many people are exactly trying. Flint's getting into it with Byron, who isn't budging, but other than that, everyone else is standing back. Watching and obviously waiting, though I'm not sure for what.

It's an eerie feeling to know that they're expecting something that I don't understand, and it has my stomach dropping and nerves skittering along my spine. I assume it's because I've done something wrong, but what was I supposed to do? Just leave him bleeding?

"I'm ... sorry." I say it haltingly, as I am packing up my first aid kit. "I guess I shouldn't have done that."

"Don't apologize," Jaxon growls as he stands up. "And don't duck your head like that. No one in here has the right to say a damn thing to you."

"I just wanted to help. And to thank you, for saving me."

"I wouldn't have had to save you if you'd been in your room, where you were supposed to be. Where I told you to be."

I take offense at the *where I told you to be* part of his statement, but considering he's still shaking a little bit, I decide not to make an issue of it. Instead, I explain, "Macy was hungry. Plus, once we figured out the mystery of the bite, we figured it would be fine for us to come down to breakfast. It turns out the nurse—"

"Chandeliers don't fall on their own. And neither do tree branches."

“The tree branch didn’t just fall. The wind was crazy.”

“There are at least two hundred people in this room alone capable of making that kind of wind. And almost that many capable of dropping that chandelier.” He’s speaking softly now, so softly that I have to strain to hear him even though he’s right in front of me. “Someone is trying to kill you, Grace.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

For long seconds, his words don't register. And when they finally do, it takes a few more seconds for me to remember how to form words.

"Kill me?" I finally whisper back to him. Or should I say, try to whisper because it's pretty hard to keep my voice super low now that the squeak is back. I would be embarrassed, but to be honest, I feel like I've got a lot to squeak about. It's been one hell of a morning. "That's insane. Why?"

"I don't know."

"Exactly. Because there's no reason for anyone to try to hurt me. I mean, look at me. I'm harmless."

"There are a lot of words I'd use to describe you. Harmless isn't one of them." He glances around the room, eyes narrowed whether in thought or warning I can't be sure. "And if I know that, so do they."

"Jaxon." I take his hand, press it to my face. "You don't really believe that. You're just upset at the near miss. You aren't thinking clearly."

"I *always* think clearly." He starts to say more, but then something over my shoulder draws his attention. "You're uncle's here."

"So? I want to talk about this."

"Later."

Before I can voice another objection, Uncle Finn closes in, with Macy hot on his heels.

“Grace, honey, I’m so sorry it took me this long to get to you. I was out on the school grounds.” He pulls me into a hug and holds me for long seconds.

Normally, I’d find it comforting—the way he feels and smells so much like my dad. But right now, all I can think about is the look in Jaxon’s eyes when he said someone was trying to kill me. His face was completely blank, completely unreadable. But his eyes had been filled with the most terrifying rage I’ve ever seen.

I don’t want to leave him alone with it, don’t want to leave Jaxon trapped in his own head. But no matter how I pat Uncle Finn’s back and assure him I’m okay, my uncle doesn’t seem to be letting go anytime soon.

“I can’t begin to tell you how horrified I am that this has happened to you,” he says when he finally pulls back. His blue eyes-- so like Macy’s and my father’s—are sad and shadowed. “Once is unacceptable. Twice in two days ...”

I guess I should count myself lucky he doesn’t know about me falling out of that tree two days ago. Three near death experiences in three days is a lot for anyone.

Then again, when I think of it like that, suddenly Jaxon doesn’t seem so paranoid. And maybe I don’t seem paranoid enough.

“Well, let’s get you out of here,” my uncle says. “We hadn’t planned on you going to class today, anyway, but I would like to talk to you before you go back to your room.”

“Oh, sure.” I can’t imagine what there is to talk about—I mean, what is there to say—but if it will make him feel better, I’m all for it. Except every instinct I have is screaming at me not to leave Jaxon, screaming at me that this isn’t the time to walk away from him, though I

don't know why. "But can I come by your office a little later? I have a couple things I need to do first—"

"Jaxon's already gone, Grace." I whirl around to find that my uncle is right. Jaxon is gone. "And I want to talk to you before you see him again, anyway."

I don't know what that means, but I don't like the sound of it. Any more than I like the fact that—once again—I never heard Jaxon leave, even though I only moved about five feet away from him once my uncle got here.

Five feet. How could I have not heard—or at least sensed—him leaving? A vampire thing? I wonder as I reluctantly follow my uncle. Or a Jaxon thing?

I'm pretty sure it's a Jaxon thing, but as I walk toward the dining hall doors, I realize all the other members of the Order are gone, too. They all left and I didn't have a freaking clue.

Of course, in my mind, that just backs up what I was telling Jaxon before my uncle showed up. I'm just a harmless human—why on earth would anyone here think I'm dangerous enough to try to kill?

I mean, Jaxon, sure. I'm surprised they aren't lined up around the castle to take a shot at him—everything about the guy screams total, complete, *absolute* power. I'm pretty sure the only thing keeping him safe is that those same things also scream dangerous af. I can't imagine anyone here being stupid enough to challenge him—even Flint backed down to him after the snowball fight.

Which is why dropping a chandelier on Jaxon makes sense. But dropping one on me? Come on. One bad spell or wolf attack and I'm a goner. Why go through the trouble of bringing an entire chandelier down on top of my head when a broken window nearly did me in, all on its own?

My Uncle Finn doesn't say anything as we walk to his office, and neither do I. I have to admit I am surprised, though, when he turns down what has to be the least ornate corridor in this entire place and then stops in front of the most boring looking door. Doesn't exactly jive with my idea of any headmaster's office, let alone the headmaster of a school that's taken on the responsibility of educating vampires and dragons and witches (oh my).

That impression is only reinforced when he opens his door and ushers me inside the most boring room in existence. Gray carpet, gray walls, gray chairs. The only spot of brightness in the room—if you can even call it that—is the heavy cherry wood desk loaded down with piles of papers, files and an open laptop.

Basically, it looks like every other principal's office I've ever seen—except the window coverings are sturdier and the gray carpet is a little more plush.

"Have a seat," my uncle tells me, gesturing to one of the plain gray chairs in front of the desk, while he walks around to the back of it.

I do as he instructs, then wait nervously for the other shoe—or chandelier—to drop. Normally, I wouldn't worry—my uncle seems like pretty much the nicest guy on the planet—but right now he's paler and more agitated than I have ever seen him.

He doesn't say anything to me at first, just kind of steeples his hands in front of him and stares at me across the desk until it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to start fidgeting ... or babbling. Then again, that's probably the point. He's been head of Katsmere Academy a long time. He probably has a million tricks—and needs them all—to keep this insane student body in line.

Giving the perpetrator time to think, and worry, is pretty much the oldest trick in the book. And while I'm not a perpetrator of anything—in fact, I'm pretty sure I know less about

what's going on here than everyone else in this school—the prolonged silence does give me time to think. About all the wrong things. Including the fact that in the last four days, what little control I've had over my life has disappeared completely.

I mean, seriously. Death by chandelier has to be one of the most random and bizarre deaths on the planet. The whole thing seems stupid, ridiculous even. But losing my parents the way I did—having them go from happy and alive to cold and dead in the space from one minute to the next—has taught me just how easy it is for life to be extinguished.

As simple as the blink of your eye, the snap of your fingers, making the wrong turn at the wrong time...

I squeeze my eyes shut as the images flood back, desperate to stem them before they fill my head. Before they overwhelm me and bury me in the grief I'm only just learning how to crawl out of.

The pain must show on my face, because suddenly my uncle is breaking the silence to ask, "Are you sure you're okay, Grace? That chandelier was huge—and terrifying."

It *was* huge and terrifying and I'm not sure how my life has gone so completely out of control. Five weeks ago, Heather and I were shopping for homecoming dresses and complaining about AP English. Now I'm an orphan living with half an encyclopedia of supernatural creatures and dodging death on the regular. At this rate, my only hope is that the universe doesn't hold a *Final Destination* type grudge.

"I'm fine," I tell him, because physically I am. There's not even a scratch on me. "Just a little shaken up."

"Give me a break. I'm traumatized and I wasn't even there. I can't believe you're only a little shaken up." He reaches across the desk to pat my shoulder a little awkwardly, but I know

he's just trying to be comforting. His blue eyes, so much like Macy's—so much like my father's—are filled with worry as they search my face.

I do my best to make sure there's nothing for him to find there, and I must succeed because, eventually, he just shakes his head and leans back in his chair. "You're just like your mother, you know that? She always faced whatever life handed her head on, too. No tears, no hysterics, just cool, calm resolve."

His casual mention of my mom destroys me, has me squeezing my hands into fists and digging my nails into my palms in an effort to keep it together.

It helps that Uncle Finn doesn't stay there, dwelling on my mom's incredible ability to take everything in stride—something I haven't inherited, no matter what my uncle thinks. Instead, he pulls something up on the computer and prints it out.

"You really sure you're okay? You don't need to go to the nurse?" he asks for what feels like the millionth time.

"I swear I'm fine. It's Jaxon you should be concerned about. He shielded me from the glass."

After all of Macy's warning about how dangerous Jaxon is, I'm a little afraid to see what Uncle Finn's reaction will be to me hanging out with him—or whatever it is the two of us were doing. But he just kind of nods and says, "Jaxon was very brave. I've already thanked him for saving my favorite niece from harm."

"Only niece," I remind him, some distant memory coming back to me of the way we used to banter over this when I was little.

"Only and favorite," he tells me. "One doesn't discount the other."

It kind of does, but I don't have the heart to tell him that. Especially since, right now, it feels pretty good to be his favorite niece, corny or not.

"Okay, favorite uncle. I guess it doesn't."

His slightly strained smile turns into a delighted grin. "Exactly!" But it doesn't last long as silence once again descends between us.

This time I can't stop myself from fidgeting—not because I'm nervous, but because I want to get out of here and get to Jaxon. I need to know if he's okay.

But Uncle Finn obviously takes my fidgeting for something else entirely, because he rubs a hand over his hair with a heavy sigh. Then says, "Macy told me the cat is out of the bag."

"Don't you mean the werewolf?" I ask with a raised brow. "Or do you have cat shifters up here, too?"

He laughs. "Nope, just the wolves and dragons for now."

"Just." My tone is ripe with irony.

"You must have a lot of questions."

A lot? Nah. Just two or three million. Starting with, "Why didn't you tell me what this place was when you came to San Diego for—" My voice breaks. "For the funerals?"

"I figured you were pretty overwhelmed then and the last thing you needed was for me to try to convince you that vampires and witches are real."

It's a fair point. But still ... "And after I got here?"

He blows out a long breath. "After you got here, it seemed easier to just kind of keep you in the dark for a while. I spoke to Dr. _____ and she agreed that we should let you get used to Alaska, and the huge change in your life, before you had to face the fact that everything you'd ever heard about the supernatural world was actually real."

What he says makes sense, I guess, but I'm still skeptical. How could he actually have thought he could hide the fact that this school is filled with things that go bump in the night? I mean, when I think of Flint jumping out of a tree to save me or Macy doing a glamour right in front of me or the shifters walking around in nothing but a pair of jeans or Jaxon ... doing whatever Jaxon does, it seems impossible to imagine I wouldn't catch on. Sure, I was thinking aliens instead of vampires, but I still knew something was very, very wrong.

My skepticism must show on my face, because my uncle kind of grimaces. "Yeah. in hindsight, it was a bad plan all the way around. It's not exactly easy to hide the fact that vampires and dragons are real when we're in the middle of a giant turf war."

"Turf war?" I ask, because that makes it sound like the issues between Jaxon and Flint are about more than just the two of them.

He shakes his head. "That's for another day. I'm pretty sure you've had as much as you can handle today—I know I have. Which leads me to the reason I've really called you in here."

It's pretty much the most awkward change of subject ever, and I almost call him on it because I know there is more to the story than he's telling me. A lot more. I'm also sure there are a lot more stories that I don't even know about, let alone the information that fleshes them out. But I don't think arguing with him is the way to get him to talk.

So, instead of demanding answers to all my many, many questions, I bite my tongue and wait to hear what Uncle Finn has to say.

"I was thinking, a lot of really horrible stuff has happened to you since you got here."

"Not much has actually happened to me," I remind him. "Jaxon has saved me several times."

“I know he has, but we can’t count on Jaxon to always be around. Stuff happens here that doesn’t happen in other schools—as you’ve seen the last few days, What happened with Jaxon and the broken window wasn’t malicious and I’m sure this falling chandelier wasn’t either. But what’s going to happen to you if someone loses control of their powers and another chandelier falls and Jaxon or Flint or Macy isn’t around to whisk you out of the way?”

“Is that what happened? Someone lost control of their powers?”

“We’re not sure what happened, but that’s the assumption we’re going with right now. Some witch was trying to see what she could do and bam ... While we’ve never lost a chandelier before, it’s not uncommon for mistakes to be made.”

That might actually be the best news I’ve heard all day because it means Jaxon was probably freaking out for nothing. No one is trying to kill me—someone just had an oops with their powers and I just happened to be in the way. It makes so much more sense than thinking that someone might actually be out to get me.

“Anyway.” My uncle is back to steeping the fingers. “That’s why I want to send you back to San Diego.”

“Send me back?” Horror slides through me like a lane on an icy runway—fast, desperate, all-consuming. “What do you mean, send me back? There’s nothing for me there.”

“I know.” He shakes his head sadly. “But there’s nothing for you here, either. And at least there, you’ll be safe.”

“You mean like my parents were safe?” The words are torn out of me, ragged and painful and terrified. Going back to San Diego means leaving Jaxon and I don’t want to do that. I *can’t* do that, not now when it’s obvious that something is happening between us. Not now when he’s the first thing I think of when I wake up ... and the last before I fall asleep.

“That was a fluke, Grace. A terrible accident—“

“Accidents can happen anywhere. And if something is going to happen to me, I’d rather it happen here when I’m with Macy and you and—“ I break off, unwilling to put voice to something I’m just beginning to understand myself. That somehow, in less than a week, Jaxon Vega has come to mean more to me than almost anyone, ever.

But, apparently, my uncle is more perceptive than I thought, because he finishes the sentence for me. “Jaxon?” he asks gently.

I don’t answer. I can’t answer. Whatever is between the two of us is between the two of us. No way can I try to explain it to Uncle Finn.

Then again, my lack of answer is pretty much an answer in and of itself. “I know Jaxon can be ...” He pauses, blows out another long breath “... seductive. I know how the girls feel about him, and I get it. He’s—“

“Uncle Finn! No!” I all but put my hands over my ears to keep from hearing my uncle refer to the boy I’m falling for as seductive.

“No?” he asks, looking confused. “You’re not attracted to—“

“I mean no! Just no! I don’t know what is going on with Jaxon and me yet, but *we*”—I gesture back and forth between us—“are not talking about.”

“We aren’t?”

“No. We aren’t.” I shake my head emphatically. “Not now, not ever.”

“I swear, talking to you about boys is as bad as trying to talk to Macy about them,” he says with a roll of his eyes. “But fine. No talking about boys. Except I do need to warn you that Jaxon is—“

“Dangerous. Yeah, Macy’s already ground that into my head. And maybe he is, but he’s never been anything but gentle with me, so ...”

“I wasn’t going to say dangerous, Grace.” For the first time there’s a touch of annoyance in his voice. “And you’d know that if you stopped interrupting me.”

“Oh, right.” I can feel myself start to blush. “Sorry.”

He just rolls his eyes. “What I was going to say is that Jaxon is not like any other boy you’ve ever met.”

“Well, obviously.” I do the fang miming thing I did with Macy and Uncle Finn bursts out laughing.

“I meant for a lot more reasons than just him being a vampire, but yes, there is the vampire thing as well.”

Oh. His words set off butterflies in my stomach, though I’m not sure why. “What else is there?” I ask, because I can’t *not* ask. “I know about his brother—“

“He told you about Hudson?” Now my uncle sounds shocked.

“Just that he died.”

“Yes. And that left Jaxon with a lot of responsibility to shoulder—Hudson’s and his own.”

“I can imagine.”

“No, Grace, you can’t.” He looks more somber than I have ever seen him.” Because being a vampire isn’t like being human.”

“Okay. Sure. But he was human once, right?” I think back on every vampire movie I’ve ever seen, every novel I’ve ever read. “I mean—“

“No. That’s just it. Jaxon was never human.”

Now I'm the shocked one. "What do you mean? I thought all vampires ..."

"Not all, no. Vampires can be made—in fact, most of them are. But they can also be born. Jaxon was born a vampire, as were the other members of the Order. And that means a lot in our world."

I can't even begin to imagine what it means because I'm still stuck on his vampires can be born revelation. "But how ... I mean, I thought you had to be bitten to become a vampire?"

"Usually, yes. But that's assuming they want to turn you. If they don't, you just get a bite. Like ..."

"Like what Marise did to me, you mean."

"Yes." He nods.

"That still doesn't explain how vampires can be born," I tell him. Part of me feels like my head is going to explode at all this new information and part of me is kind of like ... huh, okay. No big deal. I guess after making the leap to accept that all these creatures exist, *how* they came to exist isn't nearly as shocking.

"Like anything else, vampirism is a genetic mutation. Rare, exceptionally rare, but a genetic mutation nonetheless. The first documented cases happened a few thousand years ago, but since then, many more have happened."

"Wait a minute. You have *documented* cases of vampires from thousands of years ago? How is that possible? I mean, how can you prove it?"

"Because they're still alive, Grace."

"Oh. Right." I so did not see that one coming. Though I guess I should have, "Because vampires don't die."

“They do die, Grace, just much more slowly than the rest of us because their cells develop differently than ours.”

Of course they do. Otherwise there wouldn’t be so much bloodsucking and who knows what else. “And Jaxon is one of these vampires? One of the old ones?” The thought turns the butterflies into vultures. Which is strange. I mean, I’m totally willing to accept the vampire thing, so why does the old thing totally freak me out?

“Jaxon was born into the most ancient vampire family. But no, he’s not four thousand years old, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Thank God. “So, these families are the only ones who can give birth to vampires? I mean, vampires can’t just be born from anyone, right?”

“It’s a genetic mutation, so yes, vampires can be born to anyone. Usually, they aren’t. Usually, born vampires come from one of the six ancient families, but other born vampires do happen. They’re usually the ones you read about in stories, because they don’t have any knowledge of who or what they are so they ...”

“Run rampant killing everyone in sight?”

“I wouldn’t have put it quite like that,” he tells me with an annoyed look. “But yes. They are the ones who tend to make other vampires, because they don’t know any better. Or because they’re lonely and want to create a family. Whatever. The older families aren’t like that though.”

“What does that mean? They don’t kill people?” I have to admit, that’s a huge relief.

At least until my uncle laughs and says, “Let’s not get carried away.”

“Oh, well, then. Jaxon has ...”

“I’m not in the habit of talking about students with other students, Grace. And this conversation has gone far afield from where I intended it to go.”

True, but I've learned a lot, so I'm more than okay with where the conversation has gone. Though that laugh was more than a little chilling. "I don't want to go back to San Diego, Uncle Finn."

It's the first time I've said it out loud. The first time I've really even thought it and believed it. But as the words come out of my mouth, I know they're true. No matter how much I miss the beach and the warmth and the life I used to have with my parents, going back there isn't what I want. My parents are gone forever, and nothing else that San Diego has holds as much appeal as Jaxon.

Nothing.

"Grace, I'm glad you like it at Katsmere Academy. I am. But I don't know if it's safe. I thought I could protect you here, but obviously being a human in a school meant for supernatural creatures is dangerous."

"Yeah, but, isn't it my decision to make?"

"It is. But you can't make it over a boy."

"I'm not making it because of Jaxon. Or, at least, not just because of Jaxon." This, too, is true. "I'm making it because of Macy. And you. And Flint. I'm making it because I miss San Diego and my life there, but that life is over. My parents are dead and if I stay there, if I go back to the same school, and the same life I had—minus them—it's going to be a slap in the face. A reminder, every day, of what I lost.

"And I don't think I can do that, Uncle Finn. I don't think I can heal there, driving by my old house on the way to school every day. Going to all the places my parents and I used to go—"
"My voice breaks and I look away, embarrassed by the tears in my eyes. Embarrassed by how weak I feel every time I think about my mom and dad.

“Okay.” He reaches across the desk and takes both my hands in his. “Okay, Grace. If that’s how you feel, you know you can stay. You’re always welcome wherever Macy and I are. But we have to do something about all these near misses, because I am not okay with something happening to you on my watch. The day you were born, I promised your father I’d take care of you and I’m not going to let him down.”

“Sounds good, because, honestly, I’m not a big fan of the near misses either.”

He laughs. “I bet. So what—“

He’s interrupted by the buzzing of the intercom on his desk. “Finn, your nine o’clock call is on line three.”

“Oh, right. Thanks, Gladys.” He looks at me. “Unfortunately I’ve got to take this. Why don’t you head back to your room and relax for the rest of the day? I’ll think about how we’re going to keep you safe and come by around lunchtime to talk to you and Macy about it. Sound good?”

“Sounds great.” I scoop my backpack off the ground and head for the door. Once I’ve got it open, though, I turn back to my uncle. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I haven’t come up with any ideas.”

“No, I mean, thank you for coming to San Diego to get me. Thank you for taking me in. Thank you for—“

“Being your family?” He shakes his head. “You never have to thank me for that, Grace. I love you. Macy loves you. And you’ll have a place with us for as long as you want. Okay?”

I swallow the sudden lump in my throat. “Okay.” Then I book it out the door before I turn into a blubbering mess for the second time in as many days.

But I've barely closed the door and made it three steps down the hall when the floor beneath my feet starts to shake. Again.

Chapter Forty

This one isn't bad—the ground just rumbles for a few seconds before settling down again. But after everything that happened in the cafeteria earlier, it's enough to make me worry.

More than enough to have me pulling out my phone and texting Jaxon, *Where are you?*

He doesn't answer, which only makes me more nervous. I wish I'd gotten Mekhi's phone number this morning so I could text him too, but I didn't, so I'm stuck, wandering the halls and messaging Jaxon in a lame effort to figure out what's going on.

At least until I get back into the entryway of the castle and see the Order one level above me, striding toward the library. They're walking fast and though their backs are toward me, I can tell there's a problem. It's in their squared off shoulders and the tenseness that runs through each and every one of them like a livewire.

I call to Jaxon, but he's either ignoring me or he doesn't hear me. Either way, it's another bad sign, considering he usually knows exactly where I am and what I'm doing without being told.

Just the thought has me rushing up the stairs, determined to catch up with him before something terrible happens. Not that something terrible is guaranteed to happen—judging by the brevity of the earthquake, Jaxon obviously got himself under control fast—but something

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isn't right. I can feel it. Plus that little voice inside of me is back, urging me to move quickly. To get to Jaxon as fast as I can.

But he's moving swiftly, too, and I end up chasing him down one hall, past the library and several classrooms. He pauses for a second at the door of a room I haven't been in yet—I think it's one of the student lounges—and I call his name again. I'm all the way at the other end of the long hall, though, so I'm not surprised he doesn't hear me this time.

Byron does, though. He turns his head and stares straight at me. I'm too far away to see his eyes clearly, but the look on his face is more than a little frightening as he shakes his head at me in a quick back and forth motion.

It's obvious he wants me to leave them alone, but that's not going to happen—at least not before I know what's going on in there. So I just lay on the speed, determined to get to Jaxon before heJaxon does ... whatever it is he intends to do.

I don't make it. Jaxon walks in the room, followed by the other five members of the Order—including Byron, who doesn't look my way again.

Panic slams through me and I run faster than I ever have before, ignoring the way my neck and arm hurt. Ignoring the way it makes me feel dizzy. I have to get to Jaxon, have to make sure he doesn't do anything because of me that he can't take back.

I hit the door just as Jaxon throws an arm out and sends one of the shifters—at least I think he's a shifter—flying across the room, knocking over a table and several chairs as he does.

My breath catches in my throat in a strangled scream. I knew he was powerful, knew he was dangerous—everyone has been telling me so since I got here-- but before now I had no idea what that meant. But as Jaxon slams the guy into the wall with a flick of his fingers, then has him dangling a dozen feet in the air with another choppy arm movement, I startto understand.

Still, no warning, no vampire lore, nothing anyone could have told me could prepare me for what comes next.

Several students rush him—other shifters, I assume—but just like in the cafeteria, Mekhi, Byron and the others make a perimeter around him. The other shifters don't seem to care, though, because they keep running straight at them in an effort to rescue the one Jaxon is still dangling about ten feet in the air. And that's when all hell breaks loose, the five members of the Order in an all out brawl with three or four times as many shifters.

It's fast and brutal and terrifying to witness, some shifters fighting as humans, others as wolves. Teeth and claws come out, raking down Luka's back and Liam's arm as the vampires grab onto fur and send the wolves slamming to the ground. Jaxon must be the only one with telekinesis, though, because the Order is fighting the old fashioned way—with fists and feet and what I'm pretty sure are fangs.

Other students join the melee, more shifters and vampires squaring off against each other in a fight that will end I don't know how. But the ground is already littered with fur and blood. If someone doesn't stop this soon, people are going to die.

Jaxon must have the same thought because he suddenly drops the shifter he's holding in the air. He hits the ground hard, falling on his ass before scrambling back to his feet. At the same time, Jaxon waves his other arm out in a wild arc that stops everyone in their tracks. Some even fall over completely.

I'm still across the room at the entrance, but the power he blasts out hits me, too. Has me stumbling backward and grabbing onto the doorframe to keep from falling. I know I'm just a human so it probably affects me more, but still, I can't imagine the force the people close to him felt. No wonder so many of them ended up on the ground.

I think it's over—the fight and whatever Jaxon planned on doing to those two shifters—so once the power blast dissipates, I take a step forward. “Jaxon!” I call, hoping to get his attention. Hoping to convince him to take me far away from this madness.

He glances my way for one second, two, and his eyes are like nothing I've ever seen before. Not blank. Not ice. Fire. A raging inferno blazing in his gaze.

“Jaxon,” I say again, softer this time, and for a moment I think I'm getting through.

At least until he turns his head, cutting me off. Blocking me out.

Seconds later, he reaches out a hand and the shifter is once again brought to his feet. This time, though, the entire room holds its collective breath as we wait to see what comes next.

It doesn't take long for us to find out.

The shifter starts struggling, eyes going wide and fingers clawing at his throat as Jaxon reels him in. Slowly dragging him closer and closer until the shifter is once again standing directly in front of him. Eyes bugging out. Livid red scratches on his neck. Terror in his eyes.

It's enough, more than enough. Whatever Jaxon is doing, whatever point he is trying to make, he's done it. Everyone in this room knows what Jaxon can do.

“Jaxon, please.” I say it softly, not sure if he'll be able to hear me, but unable to keep silent when he's so close to killing this boy. So close to destroying the shifter and himself in one moment of careless rage.

Everything inside of me tells me to go to him, to get in the middle of him and the shifter before Jaxon does something he can't take back. But when I try to move toward him, it's like I'm running straight into a wall.

Unable to rush forward.

Unable even to take one single step.

It's not me—I can move or walk however I want—but there's an invisible barrier in front of me, as strong as stone and twice as impenetrable.

It's Jaxon's doing-- of course it is-- and there's a part of me that wants to scream at him to let me go. To yell at him to let the shifter go, to tell him that it's enough. That he's made his point.

Except Jaxon must think so, too, because whatever psychic grip he's been using on the guy disappears. Now standing under his own power, the shifter nearly falls to his knees even as he drags loud, painful sounding breaths through his abused throat and into his air-starved lungs.

Relief sweeps through me—and the room. It's finally over. Everyone is still alive. Some are more than a little worse for wear, but at least they're a—

Jaxon strikes so fast I almost miss it, fangs flashing and hands grabbing onto the shifter's shoulders as he leans forward and sinks his teeth into the left side of his throat.

Someone screams and for a second I think it's me, until I realize my throat is too tight to make a sound. Seconds pass- I don't know how many—as Jaxon drinks and drinks and drinks. Eventually the shifter stops fighting, goes limp.

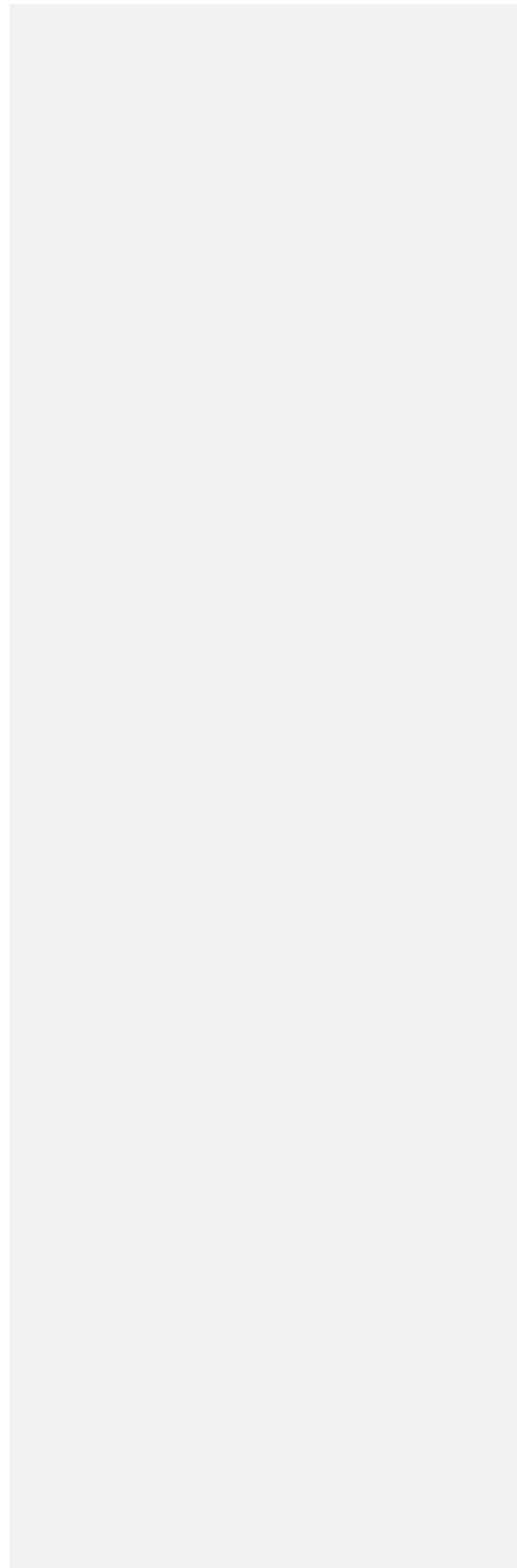
That's when Jaxon finally lets him go, lifting his head and dropping the shifter into a limp heap upon the ground.

The guy is pale, but he's still alive—eyes wide and frightened, blood trickling from the fang marks on his neck—when Jaxon looks out over the room and hisses, “This is the only warning you get.”

Then he turns and walks straight toward me, without so much as a backward glance.

And when he takes my elbow in a grip that is as gentle as it is unyielding, I go with him.

Because, honestly, what other choice do I have?



Chapter Forty-One

Jaxon doesn't say a word as he escorts me down the hall—and neither do I. After what I just saw, I'm too ... I don't know what. I want to say shocked, but that's not the right word. Neither is disgusted or horrified or any of the other descriptions—any of the other feelings—that come to mind.

I mean, watching Jaxon nearly drain that guy wasn't what I would call pleasant, but he *is* a vampire. Biting people's necks and drinking their blood is pretty much par for the course, isn't it? I mean it's usually about feeding and this obviously wasn't, but does that make it worse? Or does motive not matter when you're sucking someone's blood?

It feels like it should. And if Jaxon had actually killed him, I'm pretty sure I would feel differently. But he didn't kill him, even though it was obvious he wanted to. But I'm not sure that gets him any extra points. I mean, look what he *did* do to the guy.

Whatever point he was making, whatever transgression he was calling out, I'm pretty sure no one will be crossing Jaxon again any time soon. That counts for something to, even though I feel Machiavellian just thinking it.

As for the rest? The telekinesis? The absolute control Jaxon exerted over everyone in that ballroom including me? The obscene amount of power he wielded with just a wave of his hand? I don't know how I feel about that either. Except I do know it doesn't scare me the way it probably should.

He doesn't scare me the way he probably should.

My injured ankle twinges a little as we round a corner—probably all the running I did on it earlier-- but I bite down the cry of pain that wells in my throat. He's moving fast, I assume because he's trying to get us somewhere we can talk before the consequences for what just happened catch up to him. I mean, yeah, this is a supernatural school and the rules are probably different than what I'm used to, but I have a hard time believing it's okay for one of the paranormal species to start chowing down on another one of the species in the middle of the student lounge.

Which is why I don't complain as we quickly make our way down several hallways. At first I don't know where he's taking me, and the truth is, I don't care because we obviously need to talk. But when we end up on the back stairs, I figure it out. Jaxon isn't taking me to my room like I half guessed he would. He's taking me to his. And judging from the look on his face—the blank eyes, the tight jaw, the lips pressed into a firm, straight line—he expects me to argue with him about it.

I have no intention of doing that, though. Not until I know what we're supposed to be arguing about. And what role he thinks I should play.

The second we make it to the top of the tower steps, he lets my elbow go and puts as much distance between him and me as can be had in his little reading alcove. Which leaves me ... adrift.

Nothing has changed since I was here a few hours ago—the window is still boarded up, the rug is still missing, the open book on the table is still sitting in the exact same spot—and yet it feels like everything has changed.

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Maybe because it has. I don't know, and I *won't* know until Jaxon opens up his mouth and actually talks to me instead of standing there next to the fireplace with his hands in his pockets and his eyes everywhere but on mine.

Part of me wants to start the conversation, wants to tell him ... I don't know what. But everything inside me warns that's the wrong way to go. That if I have any hope of navigating what's going on here, I need to know what Jaxon is thinking before I open my mouth and say something that ruins everything.

And so I wait, hands in the pockets of my hoodie and eyes nowhere but on him, until he finally, finally, turns to look at me.

"I won't hurt you," he says, voice low and rusty and so empty that it hurts to listen to it. "I know you probably don't believe me after what you just saw-- and after what happened here yesterday-- but it's true. I'm in control now. You're safe with me."

"I know."

"You *know*?"

"Yeah." I nod. "I mean, I'm not going to say I never doubted it—you were pretty intense our first couple of meetings. But now? I know you would never hurt me deliberately."

He looks shocked at my words. No, not shocked. Stunned, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water as he struggles for a decent response. When it eventually comes, it's distinctly underwhelming. "Are you crazy?" he demands. "Or is it just that you have a death wish?"

It's my turn to pull his favorite trick and lift a brow. "Dramatic much?"

"You're insane." He nearly strangles on the words.

“I don’t feel insane. Then again, most crazy people don’t, right?” I’m trying to lighten up the funereal atmosphere, trying to make him smile a little. Or if not actually smile, than at least not frown so hard.

It isn’t working. In fact, I think he’s looking even more grim than he was a couple minutes ago.

“You saw what I did, right?”

“I did.”

“And you’re telling me that it doesn’t scare you?” He looks incredulous. Suspicious. And in a bizarre turn of the tables, maybe even a little disgusted. “That it doesn’t horrify you?”

“Which part?” I want to reach out, want to touch him so badly but it’s fairly obvious now isn’t the time. Not when everything about him screams boundaries. Or, more accurately, armed battlements.

“Which ... part? I don’t even know what that means!”

“It means, which part should I be afraid of? The throwing the guy across the room and choking him telekinetically? Or the biting?”

“I didn’t realize this was an either or situation. You should be afraid of both,” he all but yells at me as he paces back and forth in front of the fireplace. But his hands are out of his pockets, his jaw is unclenched and his eyes ... his eyes aren’t anywhere close to blank so at least we’re making progress. “You saw what I did to Cole.”

“Maybe I should be,” I tell him. “But I’m not.”

“Maybe you should be, but you’re *not*?”

“You’re beginning to sound an awful lot like a parrot, Jaxon. You might want to be careful of that if you want to keep your badass reputation intact.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “My badass reputation is pretty solid right now, thank you. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“Me?” I’m sick of waiting on the other side of the room for him to calm down. It’s not getting us anywhere. With that in mind, I take my hands out of my pockets and walk toward him, slow and careful and deliberate. “Why are you worried about me?”

The closer I get, the more he looks like he wants to run. Not going to lie, the idea that I scare Jaxon Vega fascinates me on all kinds of different levels. “What the fuck is happening here?”

I have no idea. I just know that I hate the way Jaxon looked when he walked up to me in the study lounge, hate even more the way he looked when he brought me into this room. Wary, lonely, ashamed when I don’t believe he has nothing to be ashamed of.

“What do *you* think is happening here?” I ask.

“Now who’s the parrot?” He shoves both hands into his hair in obvious frustration. “Are you okay? Are you in shock?”

“I’m fine. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“Me? I—“ He breaks off and just stares at me, speechless, for long seconds. “I just terrorized the entire school. Why the hell are you worried about me?”

“Because you don’t exactly look happy about it, now do you?”

“There’s nothing to be happy about.”

I’m only a few steps away from him now and I take them slowly, under his watchful, worried gaze. “So how *do* you feel about what just happened?” I ask.

“I don’t feel anything about it.”

“You sure about that?” I reach for his hand, grab on tight. He stiffens and for long seconds I’m sure he’s going to pull away. In the end, he doesn’t though, he just stands there and watches as I lace our fingers together. “Because you look like you feel a hell of a lot.”

He takes a step back even as he holds fast to my hand. “It had to be done.”

“Okay.” I take a step forward. If we keep this up, it’s not going to be long before I have him pinned against a bookcase the same way he had me pinned against that chess table on my very first day.

Poetic justice, if you ask me.

“You should go.” This time he takes two steps back. More, he drops my hand.

I feel the loss of his touch keenly, but that doesn’t stop me from closing the distance once again.

Doesn’t stop me from reaching out and resting a hand on his hard bicep.

Doesn’t stop me from softly stroking my thumb up and down his inner arm. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes.” He nearly strangles on the word, but he doesn’t move away.

And while there is a part of me that can’t believe I’m doing this-- that can’t believe I’m all but throwing myself at Jaxon—there’s another part of me just waiting for him to give in.

It’s the same part of me that’s encouraged by the fact that he’s barely coherent at this point. The same part that can’t help but feel—and be happy about—the small tremor running through his body. The same part of me that desperately wants to know what Jaxon’s mouth will feel like on my own, and is determined not to leave here until I find out.

“I don’t believe you,” I whisper. And then I take the final step, closing the last of the distance between us and pressing my suddenly trembling body flush against his.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” he tells me in a voice that’s low and tortured and anything but cold.

He’s right. I don’t have a clue what I’m asking of him. There’s a voice inside me right now that’s screaming for me to run, screaming for me to put as much distance between Jaxon and me as possible.

A part of me wants to heed the warning and run as far and fast as I can from whatever insanity this is. But I know if I do that now, I’ll never get another chance with Jaxon. If I run away from him, he’ll let me go. And that will be the end of it.

The end of us.

This can’t be that end. I won’t let it be, when there’s another side of me that yearns for Jaxon, that wants him more than I’ve ever wanted anything. So I tamp down on the voice, lock it deep inside of myself. And answer, “So show me.”

Long seconds pass, minutes maybe, and Jaxon doesn’t move. I’m not sure he even breathes.

“Jaxon,” I finally whisper when I can’t take the agony of waiting for one second longer. “Please.” My mouth is nearly pressed against his.

Still no response.

My confidence—shaky at the best of times—is about to desert me completely. After all there’s nothing quite like throwing yourself at a boy and having him turn into a human statue to make a girl feel wanted.

But I’ve got one more attempt in me one more chance to get Jaxon to understand that I trust him, no matter what he did in that hall. That I want him, vampire or not.

Two months ago, I would have walked away—run away, really—prepared to hide under my bed forever. But two months ago, my parents weren't dead and I didn't yet realize just how fleeting—how fragile—life really is.

And so I swallow down my fear and embarrassment as I slide my hand down Jaxon's arm to his own hand. Once more, I lace our fingers together before lifting both our hands to my chest. I press his palm flush against my heart and murmur, "I want you, Jaxon. I ... need you."

Something flashes in his eyes. "Say it," he demands.

Confusion swirls through me. "Say what?"

"What I am. Say it out loud."

"Vampire." I whisper it.

His eyes darken, his pupils blown completely out at this point. "Say it again."

"Vampire."

His jaw clenches and his fingers tighten reflexively on mine. "Again."

I shake my head. "Jaxon ..."

"Say it again, Grace," he grinds out. "Say what I am one more time, so I know that you understand exactly what you're getting yourself into."

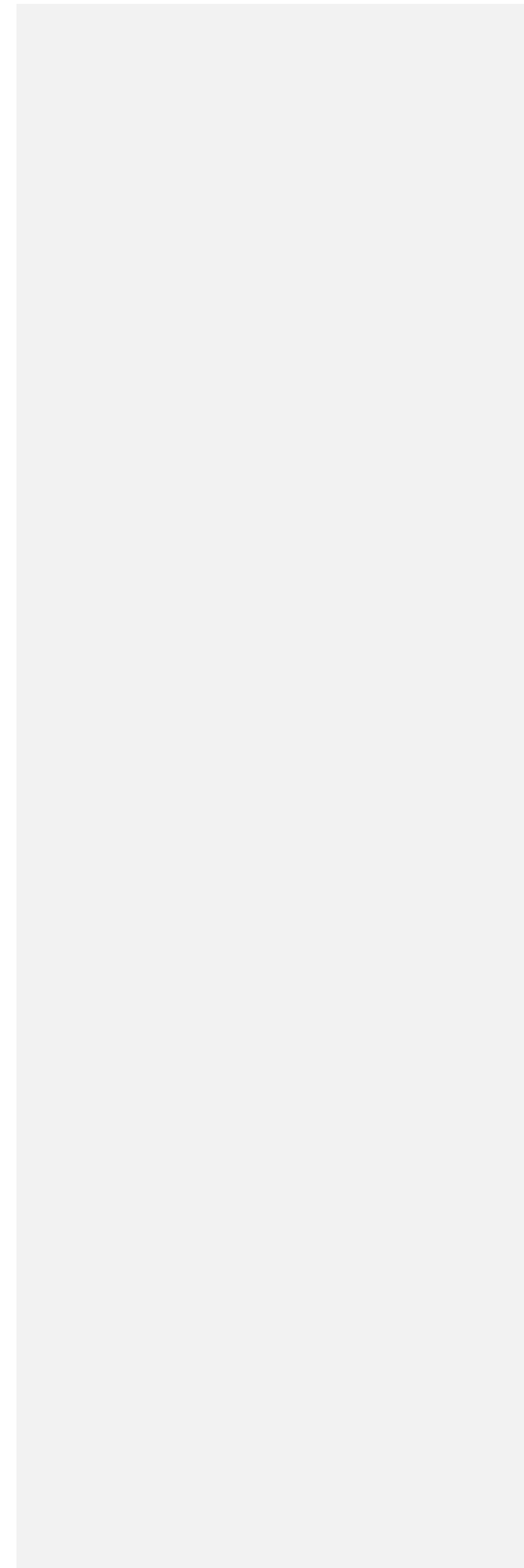
My knees tremble like some medieval heroine at the intensity in his voice, in his eyes. But I am not going to blow this now, not going to mess it up when I'm this close to getting what I want.

This close to having Jaxon as my own.

So I lock my knees in place, look him in the eye. And say "vampire," as loud and clear as I have ever said anything.

In return, Jaxon strikes. Hands grabbing, fangs flashing, body wrapping itself around me so quickly I barely understand what's happening. He whirls me around—my back to his front—tangles his hand in my hair and pulls my head back.

And sinks his teeth into my neck, right below my jaw.



Chapter Forty-Two

For one second, two, panic immobilizes me. Makes it so I can't feel, can't think, can't breathe as I wait ... for pain, for emptiness, for death.

But as seconds go by and the agony I'm expecting doesn't come my adrenaline stops shooting like a geyser and I realize that whatever Jaxon is doing to me doesn't hurt at all. In fact, it feels really, really ... good.

Pleasure like molten honey pouring through my veins, lighting up my nerve endings and swamping me with an intensity—a need—I never imagined existed. My already weak knees give out entirely and I sag against him, letting him hold me up with his long, lean body and firm arms even as I tilt my head to give him better access.

He growls at the invitation, a deep, rumbling sound that burrows deep inside of me even as the ground shakes a little beneath my feet. And then the pleasure increases, lighting me up, turning me inside out, making me tremble even as I forget how to breathe. How to be.

I press myself even more tightly against him, wind my arms up and over my head so that I can tangle my fingers in his hair. Cup his jaw in my palm. Push my skin more firmly against his mouth.

I'm desperate for more—desperate for Jaxon and whatever he wants to give me or take from me. But he's obviously got more control than I can even imagine, because just as the pleasure threatens to overwhelm me he pulls back, pulls away, his tongue stroking softly over his bite marks and sending a whole new volley of emotions straight through me.

Commented [WU123]: I can pull back here if you want, or take it just a tiny bit farther, if you prefer. Or leave as is ... My instinct is to not have him pull back quite yet, but that's the romance writer in me talking, so ...

I stay where I am-- body resting against his, hands clutching onto whatever part of him I can reach--totally dependent on him to keep me from falling as little darts of pleasure continues to zing through me. They're followed by a creeping lassitude that makes it impossible for me to so much as lift my lids, let alone step away from Jaxon.

As if I would.

"Are you okay?" he murmurs against my ear, his voice soft and warm in a way I've never heard from him before.

"Are you kidding?" I answer just as softly. "I don't think I've ever been this okay in my life. That was ... amazing. *You're* amazing."

He laughs. "Yeah, well, being a vampire doesn't come with many perks, so you've got to take them where you can find them."

"Obviously." Eyes still closed, I turn my head. Raise my face to his. Purse my lips. And pray Jaxon doesn't shy away from me.

He doesn't, his lips pressing against mine in a tender kiss that has my breath catching all over again, though for very different reasons. Moments pass and he starts to lift his head, and I hold on, wanting just a little more of him.

Just a little more of this boy who has such power and such tenderness inside of him.

He gives it to me, his mouth moving against mine, his tongue stroking along my bottom lip until, finally, I find the strength to let him go.

I pull back, open my eyes slowly, and find Jaxon staring down at me, his dark gaze filled with so much emotion I don't know whether to laugh or weep.

"Come on," he whispers, pulling back just enough to take my hand and tug me toward his bedroom,

I follow him—of course I do—but as he leads the way I can't help notice that his once neat reading alcove is now an utter disaster.

Books cover the floor, some lying down, some standing up, some leaning drunkenly against furniture halfway in between. The couch is upside down and the gorgeous old coffee table I liked so much is now splintered into little more than wood chips.

"What—what happened?" I gasp, bending down to pick up a few books that lay directly in my path.

Jaxon takes them from me with a shake of his head, tosses them onto the bottom of the couch, which is now face up. "You make me feel too much," he answers. "But I'm working on it."

I stare around us in shock. "This is working on it?"

He shrugs. "The earth barely shook this time and no window broke. That's definite progress."

"I guess." I look at the scattered wood chips. "I really liked that coffee table."

"I'll find you one you like more." He tugs on my hand. "Come on."

We make our way to his room, which—thankfully—seems to have been spared the destruction suffered by the reading alcove. It looks exactly as it did last time, complete with gorgeous paintings on the walls and musical instruments in the corner.

"I love your room," I tell him, trailing a hand over his dresser as I make my way to the drum kit. I resisted it last time, know I should resist it this time since what has happened so far today has left us with a lot to talk about.

But it's been weeks since I've sat behind a kit, weeks since I've held a set of drumsticks in my hands, and I just need to touch it. Just need to run my hands over the skins.

“You play?” Jaxon asks, as I rest my hand on the top of one of the toms.

“I used to, before ...” I trail off. I don’t want to talk about my parents right now, don’t want to bring that sadness into my first conversation with Jaxon post ... whatever that was.

He seems to get it, because he doesn’t push. Instead he smiles, really smiles, and it lights up his whole face. Lights up the whole room. Definitely lights up all the dark and sad places deep inside of me.

It isn’t until I see that smile that I realize how much he’s been holding back, how much he’s been holding *in* for who knows how long.

“Want to play something now?” he asks.

“No.” It’s my turn to hold a hand out to him. I pull him toward the bed, waiting until he chooses a side to sit on before I plop down on the other side. “I want to talk.”

“About?” he deadpans even as a wariness creeps into his gaze that hasn’t been there since he bit me.

Even thinking it gives me a little pause—there’s a part of me that still can’t believe I let a vampire bit me. Even if that vampire is Jaxon. And even if I enjoyed it way more than I ever imagined I would.

But now is not the time to freak out over things that go bump in the night—especially since I’m pretty sure I’m falling in love with one of those “things”—so I settle for giving him an *are you kidding me* look before stretching out on my side of the bed.

Jaxon lifts a brow as he watches me make myself comfortable, then stretches out next to me. He makes sure not to touch me at all as he does it.

Which is completely unacceptable. But also understandable, which is why I decide I'll deal with that later. Right now, I want to get the guarded look out his eyes. "How many tickles does it take to make an octopus laugh?"

"Excuse me?"

"How many tickles—"

"I heard you. I just ..." He shakes his head. "I don't know. Eight?"

I give a huge sigh. "Everybody always says eight. But seriously, how is that funny? How many tickles does it take? Eight. Not funny at all."

It's his turn to sigh. "So many tickles *does* it take to make an octopus laugh?"

"Ten tickles. Obviously."

He stares at me for a second, and then he cracks up. Like literally starts laughing and doesn't stop for a really long time. And I can't help grinning myself, because it's hard to be on your guard when you're laughing your head off.

"What did one bone say to the other bone?" I ask, when he finally quiets down.

"I have absolutely no idea."

"We've got to stop meeting at this joint."

This time, his response is just a short bark of laughter, but it's still a laugh so I'm counting it. "Where are you getting these jokes?" he demands.

"I've got a million of them."

He shakes his head. "I bet you do."

"What do you call a dinosaur who—"

He cuts me off with a kiss and a yank. The kiss curls my toes, but the yank ... the yank curls everything else. Especially when he rolls us over so that I'm on top of him, my knees straddling his hips and my long hair forming a curtain around us.

Jaxon takes hold of a lock of my hair, watches as the curl twines around his finger. "I love your hair," he says, pulling on the curl just to release it and watch it boing.

"Yeah well, I love—" I cut myself off as his eyes go watchful.

But truth is truth. Hiding it won't change anything. So I take a deep breath and say what I've known for days now. "I love you."

And just like that, the whole tower starts to shake.

Chapter Forty-Three

Jaxon doesn't move, but he's pretty much the only thing in the room that doesn't. The paintings flap against the wall, the instruments make a god-awful clanging sound and the bed clatters against the floor. Even the stone walls start to crack as the individual rocks begin to chafe against each other.

I lean down until my face is right in his. I expect to see the same chaos in his eyes as is reflected in the room, but they're blank instead. Completely, eerily empty, so much so that I can feel myself start to panic as he stares right past me.

"Jaxon!" Heart racing, hands shaking, head about to explode, I call his name over and over again even as the floor beneath the bed threatens to buckle. "Come on, Jaxon. Look at me, baby. Just look at me."

Still nothing, so I do the only thing I can think of. I slap his scarred cheek—not hard enough to hurt, but definitely hard enough to get his attention.

His gaze snaps to mine and I shudder in relief because I can see him in there, staring back at me behind the forced blankness. Can see him struggling for control over the ravenous power inside of him.

Jaxon. My Jaxon.

It takes long enough to make me slightly crazy, minutes slipping by like snowflakes in a storm as he slowly checks himself. Minutes that continue to see the tower room—and who knows what else at Katsmere--slowly torn apart.

And then, just like that, it's over. The earthquake, the destruction, the fear that's a wild thing within me. All of it just over, as Jaxon sits up and wraps his arms around me.

"Are you okay?" he demands, his hands roaming my body looking for I don't know what.

"I'm fine," I soothe.

"Are you sure?" He still hasn't stopped touching me, his hands running over my arms, my hips, my thighs then up and down my back under my hoodie. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, of course not. I'm good. I swear."

His eyes fall on the large bandage on the injured side of my neck and his mouth tightens. Regret burns in his eyes now, and I can't stand to see it. Can't stand to see him blame himself for something he struggles so hard to control.

So I kiss him, pouring everything I feel, everything I am, into it. And for a second it works. For a second, he responds to me like I do to him. Completely, devastatingly, eternally.

And then he's pushing me away from him, all but jumping off the bed in his haste to put distance between us. "You should go," he tells me as he stares out the window, back stiff and body so tight it's amazing he doesn't fly into a million pieces.

"I should go?" I echo, certain that I've heard him wrong. Certain that he can't mean it. "I tell you I love you and you tell me to leave?"

"Yes." No emotion, nothing. Just one simple word and it feels like he leaned over and ripped my throat clean out.

The old Grace would have run away as fast as she could if a boy said that to her, would have thrown herself on her bed and cried until her head hurt and her skin was blotchy red. Then again, the old Grace would never have fallen in love with a vampire to begin with. And the old

Grace's mom would have come in with a pint of Cherry Garcia and a box of Kleenex and stayed until she felt better.

That Grace—that life—is long gone. And because I'm figuring out just how desperately I want to build a new life here, I swallow down the instinctive hurt, the frantic need to hear him tell me he feels the same way and simply ask, "Why?"

"What do you mean *why*?" he demands, incredulous.

"I mean, why do you want me to leave? I don't expect you to love me back. I didn't even ask if you loved me back. No pressure at all. So why do I have to go?"

"Because ... because, that isn't what this is about." His voice, the look on his face, make it clear what he means.

And damn. I only thought it hurt before. Still, if I've learned nothing else this week, I've learned that Jaxon is a protector in his own way. And everything inside of me is telling me that that's what he's doing here. Trying to protect me even though I have no interest in being protected from my feelings Or from him.

But standing here going back and forth with him isn't getting us anywhere, not when his defenses are up in full force. When he was trying to teach me chess, trying to teach me strategy, my dad always told me sneaking up on someone's flank is almost always a better way to go than a full frontal assault. And while I understood what he meant, I was never any good at thinking up that kind of attack, let alone implementing it.

Until now. It's time—past time—to call Jaxon's bluff.

"So what is this about, Jaxon?" I grab onto the hem of my hoodie with hands I'm pretending aren't shaking and pull it off with one quick movement. "Is it about this?" I drop my hoodie on the bed and bend over to take off my shoes.

“What are you doing?” Jaxon looks half-horrified, half-intrigued as he grabs my hoodie and shoves it back into my hands ... exactly as I expected him to. “Put that back on.”

“What if I don’t want to put it back on?” This time I drop it on the floor and reach for the bottom of my T-shirt and pull that off, too, leaving me in just a black tank top.

When he still doesn’t make a move toward me, I shoot him a taunting smile. And say, “Awww, come on. Don’t tell me big, bad Jaxon Vega has a conscience.”

I reach for the bottom of my tank top, lift it up just enough to show off the top of my jeans and a small strip of my stomach. I don’t know what I’m going to do if he actually lets me pull this shirt off, don’t know how far I’ll go to get him to admit that he cares for me, but I really, really hope I don’t have to find out. After all, throwing myself at the boy I love while he keeps repeating how much he *doesn’t* love me is not exactly how I pictured losing my virginity ...

“Damn it, Grace.” Jaxon grabs me and does that whole yank thing again, the one that pretty much turned me into a puddle earlier on the bed. Then his face is buried in the bend between my shoulder and my neck and he’s demanding, “Why do you always have to push me?”

“Because you’re too afraid to push me.” I thread my hands through his hair and pull hard enough to have him lifting his face with a warning growl that gets me all kinds of tingly. “And, for the record, if my saying how I feel freaks you out, then I’m sorry. It doesn’t change how I feel though. Any more than it changes the fact that I don’t expect you to love me back.”

But it’d be nice if you did. Really, really nice.

I keep the last to myself—no use spooking him now that he’s finally breathing again--but it’s harder than it should be.

“It’s not that I don’t love you back, grace. It’s that I won’t love you back. I can’t.”

And just that easily, the fragile ball of hope inside of me shatters into dust. Because I *won't* love you isn't the same as I don't love you yet. Not even close. No matter how much I want it to be.

"Okay," I whisper, swallowing down the pain as best I can. It's not like there's much else I can do until I get back to my room. Maybe old Grace knew what she was doing, after all.

I bend over and pick up my hoodie and T-shirt because it gives me something to do besides look at Jaxon. "I should probably get going then."

"Grace."

I ignore him as I squat down and pick up a couple books that fell off his nightstand and put them back where they belong.

"Grace, stop."

I'm still not looking at him as I move to the corner and try to put the topsy turvy drum kit to rights.

"Come on, Grace. Look at me."

Nope. Can't quite do that yet, not when I'm trying so hard to blink away the tears before he sees them. So I pick up the pillows that are somehow anywhere but on the bed instead.

"Grace!" Jaxon's patience is obviously at an end, the command in his voice jerking me around to face him even though it's the last thing I want to do.

"I'm sorry," I tell him again. Because I am. And because I can't think of anything else to say. I'm the one who put us in this awkward position, after all. I'm the one who rushed things.

I mean, seriously, who says they love someone after less than a week? It's ridiculous. Masochistic. Totally and completely absurd.

The fact that it's also true doesn't matter—not after five days.

And now, it will never matter.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Grace,” he whispers.

Too late for that. No, not too late. He didn’t hurt me. I hurt myself.

The fact that he doesn’t feel the same way about me isn’t his fault. None of this mess is. Which is why I can’t leave him feeling all brooding and tortured and miserable.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I tell him, brushing a hand over his scarred cheek because I can’t help myself. “I’ll be fine.”

“You’re not understanding me.” He lets out a frustrated sigh. “I don’t want to kill you, Grace.”

Oh, well. Not quite where I saw this conversation going, but okay. “Umm, thank you? I, umm, appreciate you not killing me. A lot. Especially considering the close calls I’ve had since--”

He shuts me up with a kiss. Which is blatantly unfair, considering he just told me he would never let himself love me. I should pull away right now, should tell him I need him to keep his hands to himself and ... He deepens the kiss and every thought I have that isn’t yes and oh and please, flies right out of my head.

My fingers tangle in his shirt of their own volition, pulling him closer, holding him closer, as I open myself to him. As I give him everything he wants, because how can I not? I love him and if this is the last kiss I’m ever going to share with him, it’s going to be one for the record books.

Except Jaxon obviously doesn’t feel the same way, because he pulls away far too soon. He scrapes a fang across my lower lip as he draws back and the sting of it has heat sizzling down

my spine. But as he steps away, the heat dies all too soon, leaving me lost and bereft as I stare up at him.

“That wasn’t a threat,” he snarls as he draws in several fast breaths.

It gives me a perverse kind of pleasure to see that he is as affected by kissing me as I am by kissing him. “I know.”

“And it wasn’t a metaphor.” He rests a hand on my collarbone, strokes gentle fingers across the hollow of my throat. “I’ve destroyed everything I’ve ever loved, Grace. I can’t stand the idea of destroying you, too.”

Chapter Forty-Four

I'm not going to lie. Fear skitters down my spine at that revelation. As does a profound sadness.

What must it be like to live with the kind of power he wields?

What must it be like to live with the knowledge that one careless moment, one slip of control, and he can lose everything?

I take his hand, because I have to. Because I can't leave him alone in this, whatever it turns out to be. Then I lead him over to the bed and only after we're both sitting on the edge, outer thighs pressed together and hands holding tight to each other, do I say, "Tell me."

He doesn't say anything for long seconds and I start to think that maybe I'm expecting too much from this boy who spends so much of his life trying to pretend he doesn't feel. But just when I'm about to tell him to forget it, just when I'm about to change the subject to something a million times more innocuous, he says, "I killed my brother."

A million emotions go through me at those four words—shock that isn't really shock, horror, sorrow, concern, pity, pain. The list goes on and on. But the one that stands head and shoulders above the others is disbelief. Dangerous as he is, I don't believe Jaxon would ever deliberately harm someone he cares about. Everyone else might be open season, but not those he considers under his protection.

The care he takes with me is a perfect illustration of this.

"What happened?" I ask, when minutes pass and he doesn't say anything else.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does. I can’t imagine you hurting your brother on purpose.”

He turns on me then, eyes that yawning, empty blackness I’m coming to hate so much.

“Do you think intentions matter when someone’s dead? It’s not like you can just bring them back because you didn’t mean it.”

“I know that better than most.” I’m still haunted by the fight my parents and I had right before they died.

“Do you?” Jaxon demands. “Do you know what it feels like to be able to wave a hand and do this?” Seconds later, everything in the room—besides the bed we’re sitting on-- is floating in the air around us. “Or this.” Everything comes crashing to the ground. The guitar crumbles. The wall mirror shatters into a million pieces.

“You have no idea what it feels like,” he continues in little more than a whisper. Another flick of his fingers has my throat growing tight, my windpipe closing up. A lift of his hand and I can breathe again.

I take a minute, let the panic cycle through before I try to say anything that makes sense.

“Maybe you’re right,” I eventually answer. “Maybe I don’t know what any of that feels like. But I know your brother wouldn’t want you beating yourself up over whatever happened to him. He wouldn’t want you torturing yourself.”

Jaxon’s answering laugh is filled with actual humor. “It’s pretty obvious you don’t know Hudson. Or my parents. Or Lia.”

“Lia blames you for Hudson’s death?” I ask, surprised.

“Lia blames everyone and everything for Hudson’s death. If she had the kind of power I do, her rage would burn down the world.” This time when he laughs, there’s only regret in the sound.

“What about your parents? Surely they don’t hold you responsible for something you had no control over?”

“Who said I had no control? I had a choice. And I made it.”

My stomach churns. I’m an only child, but still what he’s saying seems unimaginable to me. Except I’m getting to know Jaxon and if I’ve learned anything, it’s that he’ll always cast himself in the most awful light. Will always choose to see himself as the villain even if he’s the victim.

Especially if he’s the victim.

Pointing that out to him won’t do any good, though, so I wait for him to say more. And there is more. If there wasn’t, he wouldn’t be so concerned with losing control and hurting me.

“Hudson was the first born,” he says after several minutes of silence. “The prince who would be king. The perfect son who only grew more perfect after death.”

There’s no bitterness in the words, just a matter-of-factness that makes it way too easy to read between the lines. Still, I can’t resist asking, “And you are?”

“Very definitely not.” He laughs. “Which is fine. More than fine. Being king has never exactly been an aspiration of mine.”

“But now that Hudson is dead ...”

“Exactly.” He makes the you guessed it clicking sound with the corner of his mouth. “I’m the replacement. The new heir apparent.”

And future king. My mind boggles at the mere idea. And at the knowledge that he will probably need another vampire to rule alongside him as queen. But it's way too early to be thinking about that and it's not exactly the point of this discussion anyway. No matter how much the thought of it tears at my insides.

"I am, of course, also the murderer of the former heir apparent, which in another species might cause some problems. But in the vampire world, you're only as strong as what you can defend ... and what you can take. So all I had to do to become the most fearsome and revered vampire in the world was to kill Hudson."

He gives a little shrug that is supposed to show how amusing he finds the whole thing, how much he doesn't care. I don't buy it for a second.

"But that's not why you killed him," I say because I think he needs to hear me say it.

"Does it matter? Perception becomes truth eventually, even when it's wrong." There's a wealth of pain in those four words, even though the tone Jaxon uses is completely devoid of emotion. "Especially when it's wrong. History is written by the winner."

I scoot closer to him, rest my head on his shoulder in a small gesture of comfort. "But you're the winner."

"Am I?"

I don't have an answer for that, so I don't even try. Instead I ask for the truth. His truth. "Why did you kill Hudson?"

"Because I'm the only one who could."

The words hang in the air as I try to absorb them, to figure out what he means. "So Hudson was as powerful as you, then."

“No one is as powerful as me.” He isn’t bragging. In fact, he sounds almost ashamed of the fact.

“Why is that exactly?” I squeeze his hand in a weak attempt at comfort.

He shrugs. “Genetics. Each generation of born vampires tends to be more powerful than the generation that came before them. There are exceptions, of course, but for the most part that’s how it’s always been. And since my parents come from the strongest two families and wield incredible power themselves, it’s no surprise that when they mated, their offspring ...”

“Can literally make the earth shake.”

He gives a half-smile, the first I’ve seen from him since this conversation began.

“Something like that, yeah.”

“So am I right in guessing that Hudson was not exactly responsible with his power?”

“A lot of young vampires aren’t.”

“That’s not an answer.” I raise a brow, wait for him to look at me. It takes longer than it should. “And you strike me as very responsible.”

He arches his own brows, takes a deliberate look around the disaster he’s made of his room.

“You know what I mean.”

“I know what you think you mean. Hudson ...” He sighs. “Hudson’s plans were always audacious. Always looking to give vampires more power, more money, more control, which isn’t bad in and of itself.”

I’m tempted to disagree. After all, if you plan on garnering more power, money and control, it has to come from somewhere. And history has shown the taking any of those three things tends to be less than humane—especially for the people it’s being taken from.

But that's a discussion for another time, not now, when Jaxon is finally opening up.

"But somewhere along the line, he got lost in those plans," he continues. "He got so concerned with what he could achieve and how he could achieve it, he never stopped to think if he should. I tried to pull him back, tried to talk reason to him, but with Lia and my mother whispering all kinds of *Chosen One* bullshit in his ear, it became impossible to reach him. Impossible to make him understand that his own brand of manifest destiny wasn't okay, especially when those plans included ..." His voice drifts off for a minute and a look at his eyes tells me that mentally he's not here in this room anymore. He's far away in another time and place.

"Things between vampires and shifters have always been tense," Jaxon finally continues, a defensive note in his voice that I've never heard before. "We've never really gotten along with the wolves or the dragons—they don't trust us and we sure as hell don't trust them. So when Hudson worked up a plan to—" He curls the fingers of his free hand and makes air quotes—"put the shifters in their place," a lot of people thought he was onto something."

"But not you."

"Going after the shifters looked and smelled an awful lot like racism to me. Maybe even genocide. And when he started adding other supernatural creatures to his list, things got ugly, fast."

"How ugly?" I ask, though I'm not sure I actually want to know the answer. Not when Jaxon looks more grim than I've ever seen him.

"Ugly." He refuses to elaborate. "I tried to reason with him, tried to talk him down. Even went to the King and Queen to see if they could do something with him."

I note how he calls his parents the King and Queen instead of mom and dad, and for a second I flash back to the first day I met him. To the chess table and the Vampire Queen and the things he said about what I thought at the time was just a chess piece.

It all makes so much more sense now.

“They couldn’t.”

“They wouldn’t,” he corrects. “I tried to reason with him. So did Byron and Mekhi, and a few of the others who would have graduated with him. He didn’t listen. And one day he started a fight that would have ripped the whole world apart had it been allowed to continue.”

“That’s when you stepped in.”

“I did. I thought I could fix things, thought I could talk him down. It didn’t work out like that and in trying to end it, I lost control. My emotions—and the power they bring out—got away from me. I killed a lot of people to get to him. And then I killed him.”

The eyes he turns to me are blank, but I can see the pain—the devastation—behind the emptiness. It makes me ache for him in a way I’ve never ached for anyone, not even my parents. “Oh, Jaxon.” I put my arms around him, try to hold him, but his body is stiff and unyielding against my own.

“His death destroyed my parents and it broke Lia into so many pieces I don’t think she’ll ever recover. Before all this happened, she was my best friend. Now she can barely stand to look at me. Flint’s brother—one of Hudson’s closest friends despite his disdain for shifters—died in the same fight and Flint’s never been the same.”

He takes a deep, shuddering breath and let’s himself sink into me. I hold him as tightly as I can, for as long as he’ll let me. Which isn’t long at all. He pulls away long before I’m ready to let him go.

“It’s why I warned you away from Flint, why I had to do what I did in the study lounge. They’ve been gunning for you since you got here. I don’t know if it started because you’re human, but I know it’s continued because you’re mine. That stops now.”

There’s so much in that little speech that I don’t know where to start. “They’ve been gunning for me?” I finally ask.

He gives me a look. “You don’t actually think everything that’s happened to you since you get here is accidental, do you? I mean, I’m responsible for you nearly bleeding to death, but the rest ... the rest has been them.”

“The chandelier wasn’t an accident?”

He gives me a look. “Who told you to walk under that chandelier?”

“Flint did,” I answer as uneasiness stirs in my belly. “But he wouldn’t hurt me. He saved me when I fell off that branch—“

“Did he?”

“*Didn’t* he?”

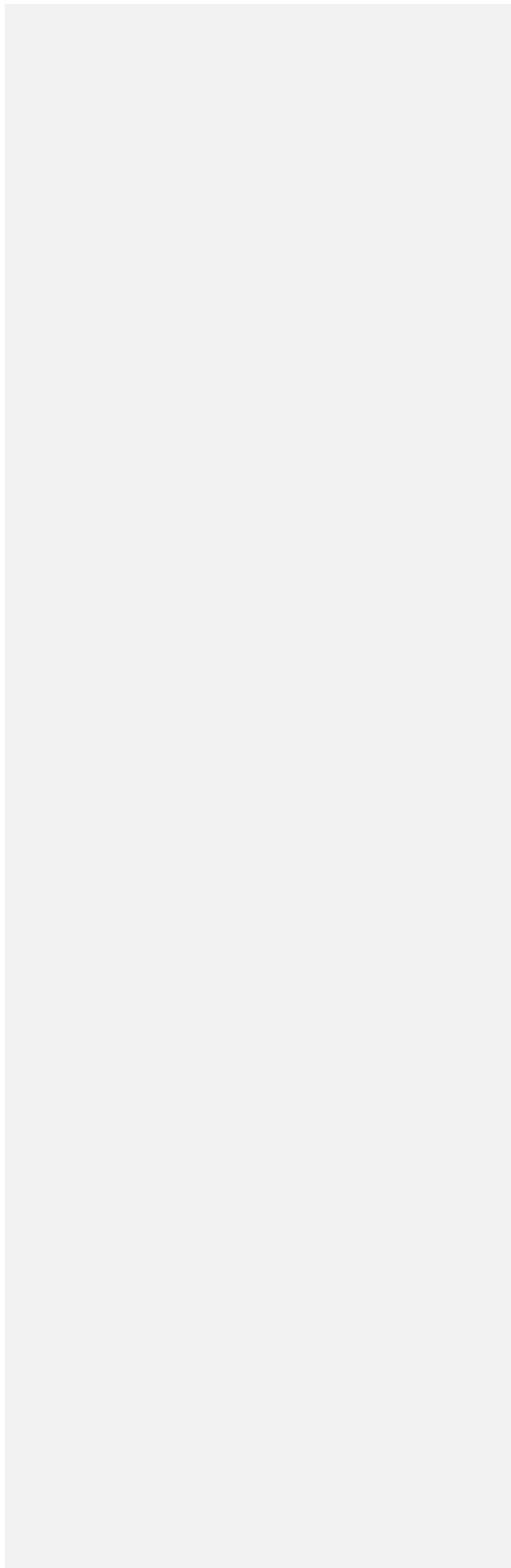
Jaxon doesn’t answer, just looks away, jaw working.

“Are you telling me Flint *didn’t* dive off that tree branch to save me?”

“I’m telling you from the time you got here, the shifters have been out to get you. It was the wolf alpha who was responsible for dropping the chandelier, but it’s a hell of a coincidence that Flint made sure you were walking in that direction instead of sitting with the witches. And I don’t believe in coincidences. As soon as I prove it, I’m taking care of him, too.”

The uneasiness becomes a full-fledged sickness as I remember the look on Flint’s face after I thanked him for not letting me splat all over the snow. And how fast Jaxon got there after

I fell. “You’re still not answering my question, Jaxon. Did Flint jump out of that tree to save me or did you *knock* him out of that tree?”



Chapter Forty-Five

Jaxon looks away from me for the fifth time in as many minutes. Then says, “I wasn’t there. I couldn’t *knock* Flint out of anything.”

It’s my turn to grind my teeth together. “You know what I mean.”

“What was I supposed to do?” he demands, throwing his arms up in the air with as much emotion as I’ve ever seen from him. “Let you fall? I figured if I stopped you in mid-air and brought you gently to the ground, it would freak you out even worse—not to mention leave you with a bunch of questions no one was prepared to answer.”

“So you made Flint dive after me instead?”

“Yes. And I’d do it again. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe, Grace, even if that means taking on every shifter in this place.”

“Including the alpha,” I say, thinking about what he just did in the study lounge.

“Including the alpha—and anyone else I think might be a threat to you.”

Including himself. He doesn’t say the words, but then he doesn’t have to. They hang there between us, everything I want just out of reach. I’m beginning to think that’s the story of my life.

I want to throw myself at him like I did before, to beg him to love me. But that’s not fair to either of us. I want him to let himself love me in spite of his reservations. I want him to love me because he can’t *not* love me. And since we’re not there yet—yet being the operative word

because I'm not prepared to give Jaxon up now that I've found him—I settle for saying the only thing I can say right now. Doing the only thing I can do.

I wrap my arms around his waist, rest my head in the crook of his neck. And whisper, “Thank you.”

“You’re *thanking* me?” he demands, stiffening beneath the kisses I keep pressing into the sharp line of his jaw—and the scar he works so hard to keep hidden. “For what?”

“For saving me, of course.” I pull him closer, skim my lips over his cheek and along his scar, dropping a kiss every couple centimeters or so. “For not caring about the credit and only caring about making sure I’m okay.”

He’s sitting rigidly now, his spine ramrod straight with discomfort over what I’m doing. What I’m saying. But I don’t care. Not now, when he’s in my arms. Not now, when I’m overwhelmed by the feelings I have for him inside of me.

I have to make adjustments for him—not just the vampire thing, which is an obvious one, but the whole won’t let himself feel too much for me thing. For a girl who’s lost the only people in the world who have ever loved her unconditionally, the whole not letting himself love me thing is a hard pill to swallow.

Do I understand it? Absolutely. Does that mean I like it? Not even close.

So if I’m willing to accept all this about him—not just accept it, but embrace it—then he needs to accept me and what I want to give him as well. What I need to give him, including the understanding that I don’t give a damn about his scar except that it means he suffered. And continues to suffer, every time he sees it. Not because he’s vain, but because it reminds him of Hudson. And the event that has haunted him for the last fifteen months even though he did the right thing, the *only* thing he could do under the circumstances.

Which is why, instead of letting him go when he bends his neck in an effort to hold his scar away from me, I follow him. More, I climb onto his lap, straddling his hips with my knees on either side of his thighs and my arms wrapped tight around his neck.

And then I kiss him some more, long, slow, lingering touches of my lips to his brow, his cheek, the corner of his mouth. Over and over, I kiss him. Taste him. Touch him. Over and over, I whisper how thankful I am that he found me. How much I adore him. How much I admire him. And how he doesn't have to love me—that I'll take whatever he feels he can give me.

Slowly--so slowly that I almost don't notice it at first-- he relaxes against me. This rigidness leaves his spine. His shoulders curve forward just a little. The hands that were fisted on the bed loosen up and wrap themselves around my waist.

And then he's kissing me, really kissing me, with open mouth and searching tongue and hungry, desperate hands. He presses closer and I arch against him, pressing my mouth into his until his breath becomes my breath, his need becomes my need.

My hands slide under his shirt, my fingers stroking along his smooth skin and the lean muscles of his back. He makes a noise deep in his throat, arches into my touch. And then my phone goes off at the same time there's a heavy pounding on Jaxon's bedroom door..

The sounds break the spell and he pulls away with a laugh. I hold tight to him, not ready to let him go. Not ready for this to end. He must feel the same way, though, because his hands tighten on my waist even as he presses his forehead to mine.

"You should get your phone," he says after a few seconds as it continues to ring. "Finn's probably freaking out because he doesn't know where you are."

The pounding on the door grows harder, more commanding. “Or he’s freaking out because he knows exactly where I am.”

“Yeah, there’s that, too.” He grins at me, his hands lingering on my waist for just a second as I start to climb off his lap. “You want to get the door or should I?”

“Why would I ...” Horror sweeps through me. “You don’t think my uncle is the one pounding on the door, do you?”

“Not sure who else you think it would be, considering his beloved niece was last seen in the company of the guy who just picked a fight with every wolf shifter in the school.”

“Oh my God.” I look around for a mirror so I can fix my hair just enough that it doesn’t look like I’ve spent the last hour making out with a vampire, then kind of stop in shock as I realize that there’s nothing even resembling a mirror in here. “So are the old stories true?” I ask, combing my hair with little more than my fingers and a prayer. “Vampires really can’t see themselves in mirrors?”

“They really can’t.”

“How is that possible?” I tuck my shirt in and make sure my hoodie is pulled down over my hips. “I mean, how do you know what you look like?”

He holds up his phone. “Selfie, anyone?” He moves toward the door which is practically vibrating under the force of my uncle’s knocks. “Is this seriously what you want to talk about right now?”

A little bit, actually. Now that the whole vampire thing is out in the open, I realize I have a million questions. Things like >>>>>

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But Jaxon is right. Now isn’t exactly the time to be thinking about any of this. “Of course not.” I nod toward the door. “Open it and let’s get this over with.”

“It’ll be fine,” he soothes.

Not if Uncle Finn is anything like my father it won’t be. Then again, the guy’s a witch and runs a school for the supernatural ... so probably not that much in common, after all.

“It will be whatever it is,” I tell him, aiming for Zen and sounding like a moron. But come on, it’s hard not to freak out when I’m pretty sure the boy I love is about to be expelled.

Jaxon winks at me, even blows me a kiss, before rearranging his face into blankness as he throws open the door.

“Nice of you to let me in,” my uncle says dryly. “So sorry you felt the need to hurry.”

“Well, Grace did have to get her clothes back on.”

“Jaxon!” I gasp, my cheeks turning I can’t even imagine what shade of red. “I was fully dressed, Uncle Finn. I swear.”

“This is what you want to lead with after that stunt you just pulled?” my uncle demands. But before Jaxon can answer, he turns on me. “I thought you were heading back to your room over an hour ago?”

“I was. But I got ...”

“Sidetracked?” my uncle finishes for me with a raised brow.

At this point, I’m pretty sure the blush has taken over my entire body. Including my eyelashes and hair. “Yeah.”

“If you’re well enough to be up here, you’re probably well enough to be in class, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. I probably am.”

“Good.” He glances at his watch. “First period should be about half done right now—we got a late start due to the chandelier incident. You should head there now.”

I think about arguing, but he's got the same look on his face my dad used to have when I pushed him to the limit. I want to stay with Jaxon, want to know what's going to happen to him, but I'm afraid if I put up a fuss now, it will just make my uncle angrier. And that's the last thing I want if he's about to decide Jaxon's fate.

So instead of demanding to be able to stay as I so want to, I just nod and pick up my backpack from where Jaxon dropped it in the corner. "Yes, Uncle Finn."

For a second I could swear that surprise flashes in his eyes, but it's gone so fast that I'm not sure I imagined it. Then again, Macy doesn't exactly strike me as the biddable type, so maybe he really didn't expect me to agree so easily.

Either way, it's too late to argue now, so I turn to Jaxon. "I'll see you later?" I deliberately avoid making eye contact with my uncle as I wait for his response.

"Yeah." His tone says obviously, even if he keeps his words toned down in deference to my uncle. "I'll text you."

It's not quite the response I was hoping for, but I'm not in a position to argue. So I just give him a little smile as I head for the door.

And try not to panic when the last thing I hear before Uncle Finn slams it closed is, "Give me one reason not to ship your ass back to Prague. And make sure it's a good one."

Chapter Forty-Six

I pull out my phone on the way down the stairs to Brit Lit, and find about twenty text messages waiting for me. Five from Heather, complaining about how boring school is without me, along with several photos of her in her costume for the Fall play.

I fire off a text telling her how great she looks dressed as the Cheshire Cat, and another one sympathizing with the boredom. I want to tell her about Jaxon—not the vampire stuff, just the cute boy stuff—but that’s a subject I know I shouldn’t open until I know for sure what’s going on between us.

Plus, I’ve never lied to Heather and I don’t know how to start now. I mean, logic says that if I’m going to be with Jaxon I’m going to have to lie sometimes—I can’t walk around announcing to the world that he’s a vampire without us having to dodge a lot of wooden stakes and garlic—but I need to think about what I’m going to say. I’m a terrible liar at the best of times. When talking to my bff? I’ll crack in ten seconds flat and that can’t happen. Which is why I don’t say anything more than I absolutely have to, even though a part of me is dying for her opinion about—oh, I don’t know—everything.

Most of the other texts are from Macy—there are seven of them talking about what happened in the study room. She wasn’t there, but the news of what Jaxon did the wolf alpha has obviously spread. Not that I expected any different when he and Uncle Finn are currently locked in the tower together.

Uncle Finn sent several texts as well, all of them demanding to know where I am. I don't bother to answer considering he already found me.

The last two texts are from Flint, and I'm so shocked—and annoyed—I nearly miss a step and fall straight on my face. But then I remember he doesn't know what I know. The asshole dragon doesn't have a clue that I know he's been trying to kill me instead of help me.

It still pisses me off, though—the whole thing does—so I don't bother answering him. I swear to myself that I'll never answer him again, no matter what explanation he comes up with and no matter how many excuses he has ready.

Part of me wants to find him right now and tell him what an asshole he is. But I've finally made it to Brit Lit and I don't feel like testing Uncle Finn right now, not with the mood he's in. So I shove my phone back into the front pocket of my hoodie.

I'm in pajama pants instead of the school uniform, but with everything that's happened today, I'm pretty sure no one will care. They'll be too busy trying to figure out the best way to get all the dirt.

Sure enough, the whole room goes eerily silent the moment I walk into my Brit Lit class. The teacher makes an obvious effort not to look at me, but everyone else in the classroom does. You'd think I'd be used to that after the last week, but today—with everything that's happened—it feels a million times more awkward than usual.

But, honestly, it's not like I can blame them. If I wasn't me, I'd be staring, too. I mean, come on, Supernatural or not, they're still high school kids and I am still the girl who just caused a fight between the wolf alpha and the most powerful vampire in existence.

It'd be stranger if they didn't stare.

That knowledge doesn't make the walk across the room to my desk any easier, though. Even with Mekhi giving me a supportive smile.

"We just started Act Four, Scene Five," he tells me in a soft undertone as I slide into my desk.

"Thanks," I answer, pulling the copy my teacher loaned me out of my backpack and rifling through until I find the right page.

"Everyone's taking a turn reading today, Grace," Ms. _____ informs me from the front of the classroom. "Why don't you read Ophelia in this scene?"

"Okay," I answer, trying not to read into the fact that I get to play the crazy girl in the scene. We read Hamlet first thing this year in San Diego, so I know it pretty well. And I know this scene is the one where Ophelia goes mad—or at least, where the audience gets to see her insanity for the first time. I try not to take it personally that she seems to think I'm the one who should play Ophelia here ...

Mekhi is playing Laertes, my brother, which makes it a little easier to read the lines of an insane girl who has just lost her father and feels all alone in the world. But I still struggle to get through them, especially the lines toward the end.

"There's a daisy: I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died: they say he made a good end—For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy."

Mekhi reads Laertes's line—obviously concerned about the state of my mental health. And by my, I mean Ophelia, I remind myself as I move into softly singing my last lines in the scene—and the play. "And will he not come again? And will he not come again? No, no, he is dead; Go to thy death-bed: He never will come again—"

The bell rings before I finish her lines, and I stop as the rest of the class starts shoveling their books into their backpacks as fast as they can go. “Thank you, Grace. We’ll pick up where you left off tomorrow.”

I nod, then grab for my own backpack, doing my best not to think about the death scene I just read. Doing my best not to think about my parents—and about Hudson. About Jaxon’s grief over what he was forced to do to his brother.

It’s harder than I want it to be, especially when I realize art is next. It’s not the class that bothers me—I love everything about art—but I’m so not up for another walk through those creepy af tunnels. Especially now that I wonder what would have happened to me down there alone with Flint, if Lia hadn’t come along when she did.

But I’ve got to get to class, so it’s no use spending too much time dwelling on might have beens. Especially now that Jaxon has pretty much made me untouchable. What happened in that lounge might have been horrifying to witness, but I’m not going to lie. The fact that I don’t have to be afraid of chandeliers falling on my head or random shifters shoving me out of trees isn’t a bad thing.

And when Mekhi walks with me down the hall instead of racing off to his next class, I realize that Jaxon’s protection extends even further than I thought. The threat was made, and I’m pretty sure heeded judging by the wide berth everyone is giving me at the moment. And still it’s not enough for him. Still he wants to make sure I’m safe, so much so that he’s called in other members of the Order to ensure I am.

Maybe it should bother me. And honestly, if this was a normal school or a normal situation, it would probably bug the hell out of me to have such a protective boyfriend? But I’m currently surrounded by shifters, vampires and witches, all of whom play by rules I don’t

have a clue about. Plus it's been less than three hours since a chandelier nearly crushed me to death. Not accepting Jaxon's—and Mekhi's protection—would be stupid, at least until things calm down around here.

I turn to thank Mekhi for his protection, then freak out a little when Flint pretty much shoves his way between us. “Hey, Grace. How are you feeling?” he asks, all sweetness and concern. “I’ve been worried about you all morning.”

“Worried about me or worried that the chandelier didn’t do its job well enough?” I demand, walking faster in what I already know is a useless attempt to get away from him.

He doesn’t stop walking, but everything about him kind of stills when I confront him with what Jaxon told me—which tells me all I need to know.

And still he tries to play it off. “What do you mean? Of course I’m worried about you.”

“Give me a break, Flint. I’m not stupid. I know what you’ve been up to.”

For the first time in our entire “friendship,” anger flashes in his eyes. “Don’t you mean you know what that tick told you I was up to?” he sneers.

Mekhi’s face goes livid at the insult to Jaxon and suddenly he’s right there between the two of us again. “Back the fuck off, Dragon boy.”

Flint ignores him and continues talking to me. “You don’t know what’s really going on, Grace. You can’t trust Jaxon—“

“Why? Because you say so? Aren’t you the one who’s been trying to kill me since I got here?”

“It’s not for the reasons you think.” He shoots me a pleading look. “If you would just trust me—“

“Trust you?” I repeat. “You want *me* to trust *you*? Fine. Then tell me the truth about what happened during the snowball fight. Did you jump out of that tree to catch me or did Jaxon knock you out of it?”

“I ...it wasn’t like ... Jaxon overreacted ... I was--“

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Stay away from me, Flint. I don’t want to have anything to do with you from now on.”

“Well that’s too bad, because I need to talk to you.”

“Too bad because I don’t want to talk to you.” I push past him, make the turn into the hallway that leads to the tunnels.

“Grace, please.” He reaches out and grabs hold of my arm. Before I can tell him not to touch me, Mekhi is there, fangs bared and warning growl pouring out of his throat.

“Get your hands off her,” he hisses.

“I’m not going to hurt her!”

“Damn right you’re not. Step back. Montgomery.”

Flint makes a frustrated sound deep in his throat, but in the end, he does what Mekhi asks. Mostly, I think, because there was going to be a fight right here in the hallway if he didn’t. One where Mekhi tries to tear him to pieces.

“Come on, Grace. It’s important. Just listen for one minute.”

I stop because it’s fairly obvious at this point that he isn’t planning on going away.

“Fine. You want to talk, talk. What’s so important?” I cross my arms over my chest and wait to see what he has to say.

“You want me to say it now? In front of everyone?” he snarls, looking at Mekhi.

“Well, I’m sure as hell not going to go somewhere alone with you at this point. I may be ignorant about your world, but I’m not downright stupid.”

“I can’t do this. I—“ He breaks off, runs a frustrated hands through his hair. “I can’t talk to you in front of him.”

“Then you’re not talking to her at all,” Mekhi says, once again getting between us. “Let’s go, Grace.”

Mekhi takes my arm and I let him guide me away from an increasingly angry Flint. Which is kind of obnoxious when you think about it. He’s the one who tried to kill me with a chandelier and now he’s the one who gets to be angry? Where’s the logic in that?

“Damn it, Mekhi. At least do me a favor and don’t leave her alone, okay? I’m serious, Grace. You shouldn’t go anywhere alone.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Mekhi snarls back. “What do you think is happening here?”

Flint doesn’t answer, and I don’t bother to look back as Mekhi guides me towards the tunnels. He doesn’t say anything about Flint—or about anything—as we make our way through the first door. But the silence only makes me feel worse about what just happened. And about trusting Flint from the beginning.

I just wish I knew what he got out of hurting me when I’ve never done anything to him.

“Who knows with dragons?” It’s not until Mekhi answers that I realize I spoke out loud. “They’re super secretive and nobody ever really knows what’s going on with them.”

“Apparently.” I give him a shaky smile. “I really am sorry about all this-- and about you having to walk me to class. I do appreciate it, though.”

“No worries. It takes a lot more than a bad-tempered dragon to ruin my day. Besides, if I end up a couple minutes late to Calculus, you’ll only be doing me a favor.” He grins down at me as we weave our way down into the tunnels.

As we make our way through all the doors, including stops for the security codes and all the rest of the stuff I had to do with Flint, I’m struck by how different it feels with Mekhi. With Flint, everything inside of me was screaming a warning, telling me to get the hell away from him as fast as I could.

With Mekhi, everything about this trip into the tunnels feels normal. No, better than normal. Like walking with an old friend, one I’m totally comfortable around. There’s no voice warning me to be careful, no uncomfortable shiver running down my spine. All of which tells me the bad feelings were tied to Flint and not the tunnel all along.

Still, I wait for the voice to kick in as we go deeper into the tunnel. If not in warning, then at least a little self-congratulatory rumba for staying alive against all odds. Something that proves I’m not crazy for thinking I hear a voice deep inside myself that tells me what to do.

I admit, I’ve never had anything like it before, just the normal conscience type stuff we all have when I’m trying to decide between right and wrong. But this voice is different. In some ways it feels almost sentient, like it exists away from my own consciousness and subconscious.

Which is absurd, unless I’ve suddenly developed Schizophrenia or Multiple Personality Disorder—which I sincerely hope hasn’t happened. And if it hasn’t happened, I can’t help wondering what’s going on. Can’t help wondering just what Jaxon, or Katsmere, or freaking Alaska itself, has woken up within me.

If anything.

I mean, the more likely answer is that I'm just being paranoid. Considering it's looking more and more like a whole faction of the school has been out to kill me since I got here, I figure a little paranoia is warranted.

Whatever is going on within me, I'm glad the feeling of doom is gone. For now, I'm just going to accept that it is and worry about the rest when I've had a chance to breathe for a little while-- which won't happen until I know for sure what Uncle Finn has decided about Jaxon.

Jaxon didn't act like he was afraid of being expelled, but that doesn't mean much. Hedoesn't strike me as being afraid of anything, let alone what the headmaster of his high school might do to him. That doesn't mean Uncle Finn doesn't have the power to make him leave Katsmere Academy temporarily ... or for good.

I check my phone as we walk through the last gate into the tunnels. Still no text from Jaxon.

"Have you heard from him?" I ask as we start the long trek to the art building.

"No."

"Is that normal? I mean, does he usually check in with you or—"

I break off as Mekhi laughs. "Jaxon doesn't check in with anyone, Grace. I thought you would have figured that out by now."

"I did. I just ... what do you think is going to happen?"

"I think Finn is going to give him a slap on the wrists and then move on."

"A slap on the wrist?" I don't even try to hide my shock. "He nearly killed that boy."

"Nearly killed and killed are two very different things here— in case you haven't noticed." He gives me a knowing look. "At some point we all screw up, learning how to deal with our powers."

“Yeah, but this wasn’t a screw up. This was a calculated attack.”

“Maybe,” Mekhi shrugs. “But it was also necessary. I don’t think Finn will blame Jaxon for trying to protect you. Or be stupid enough to send him away when he’s the one protecting you.”

“School rules can’t just be all about me, even if the headmaster is my uncle. Besides, I thought Jaxon was the whole reason the shifters were after me. Because they wanted payback for everything that went on with Hudson?”

I mean, what else could it be? I’ve never done anything to any of these people nor is there anything supernatural about me. No powers, no shifting, no sudden desire to bite people’s necks. So unless they’re playing a rousing game of *Terrorize the Human*, I can’t imagine what the shifters could possibly get out of trying to kill me.

“Jaxon’s operating under that assumption, which makes sense considering they’ve just been waiting to find something that matters to him. Waiting for something they can take away from him.”

My heart beats a little faster at Mekhi’s words—and the implication that I’m what Jaxon cares about. It’s probably stupid considering those feelings put a big red X right on me. But at the same time, I can’t help wanting it to be true. Can’t help wishing that Jaxon could feel for me even half of what I feel for him.

“What was Hudson like?” The words come out before I even know I’m going to say them. But once they’re out there, I don’t want to take them back. Not when getting to know Jaxon’s brother—and their relationship—might help me get to know him, as well.

Mekhi glances down at me and there’s something different in the look he gives me, something wary and fearsome all at the same time. It’s so similar to the look Jaxon had when he

was talking about Hudson—minus the palpable anguish—that it makes me wonder just who this guy was. And how his presence can be so keenly felt, even after he’s been dead for over a year.

“Hudson was ... Hudson,” Mekhi says with a sigh. “I guess the best way to describe him would be as a light version of Jaxon.”

“A light version?” That’s not what I was expecting, especially after what Jaxon had to say about him earlier. “I thought he was a ...” I trail off because I don’t want to call the former heir to the vampire throne a monster, even though that’s exactly what I’m thinking.

“Not light as in sunshine,” Mekhi elaborates as we reach the center rotunda of the tunnels. “I mean Jaxon-lite. He was the older brother and pretty much the prodigal son—their parents adored him. And so did a lot of other important people in our race.

“But being able to fool people into thinking you have a character isn’t the same as actually having one. And the one thing I know for sure is that Hudson wasn’t a quarter of the person Jaxon is. Too selfish, too egotistical, too opportunistic. All Hudson cared about was Hudson. He was just good at pretending to care about what those in power wanted him to care about.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I don’t say anything. After all, I never met Hudson and I don’t care about him at all beyond the fact that Jaxon is using his brother’s death to punish himself.

But I’ve got to admit, Mekhi’s description sounds awfully close to what I figured out reading between the lines of what Jaxon was telling me. He’s beating himself to hell and back for what happened between them, but it sounds to me like he did the world a favor taking Hudson out of it. No matter what Jaxon thinks about it.

A noise sounds far behind us and suddenly Mekhi is shoving me behind him as he whirls around, hands raised in an obvious fighting stance. Which he drops once he realizes the noise came from Lia, who is racing up the tunnel toward us.

And by racing, I mean, really booking it. Wow, she can move fast when she wants to. I mean, that's no surprise—I've seen Jaxon move and it's insane how quickly he can get to me when he wants to.

But so far, every time he moves like that it's because I'm in some kind of trouble and he wants to get to me. The same kind of trouble that keeps me from paying close attention to him because I'm afraid I'm in the middle of trying not to die.

Watching Lia run without any safety fears for myself, though? It's intense. The tunnel it just took us five minutes to walk down, she covers in under ten seconds.

And when she gets to us? She isn't even breathless.

"Hey, girl, where's the fire?" Mekhi asks as she moves to pass right by us. I'm surprised at his tone, and the fact that a lot of the warmth he has when he talks to me is now absent.

Of course, she isn't exactly dripping friendliness herself when she answers, "Oh hey, guys. Just trying to get to art on time."

Mekhi raises a brow. "Since when do you care about being on time?"

She looks away, jaw working, and for a second, I'm pretty sure she isn't going to answer him. But then she shrugs and says, "I'm working on a painting of Hudson."

"So that's who it is," I exclaim, thinking back on the portrait I saw her working on yesterday. "He's really good looking."

"You have no idea." Her lips curve in the closest thing I've seen to a smile from her. "I'm nowhere near talented enough to do him justice."

“False modesty?” Mekhi mocks. “That’s not like you, Lia.”

“I’d say bite me,” she answers with an eye roll. “But who knows where you’ve been.”

“Thanks, but I’m too afraid of catching rabies to ever bite you,” he sneers back.

And can I just say Wow. There’s enough bad vibes flowing between them that I can’t help thinking I’m about to witness my second vampire attack for the day. Apparently when her relationship went bad with Jaxon, it went bad with the rest of the Order, too, because right now Mekhi honestly looks like he wants to rip her throat out.

But just when I’m trying to figure out how to get out of range, Lia flips him off. Then hooks her arm through mine and says, “Let’s go, Grace. He’s so not worth it.”

“Oh, well, actually, Mekhi was just walking me to class.” I don’t like being in the middle of the two of them, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to bail on Mekhi the first chance I get.

The warning bell chooses that exact moment to ring, and Mekhi gives a little shrug as he takes a step back. “I’m good heading to calculus if you’re good with Lia showing you the rest of the way.”

“I’m pretty sure I can show her the way,” Lia snarks, but I just smile my gratitude at him.

I like that Mekhi isn’t making a big deal of the me not being alone thing, just kind of making sure all the bases are covered without putting up a big fuss. Especially since Jaxon has already covered the big fuss department.

“I’m good,” I tell him, and I mean it. Down here, surrounded by people Jaxon trusts—even if they don’t trust each other—makes everything else that’s happened so much easier to deal with. “You should get to calculus.”

“Words absolutely no normal person has ever wanted to hear,” he answers with a sigh. But he steps back, does a little two fingered salute as a good-bye wave.

Impulsively, I close the distance between us to give him a hug. “Thanks for walking with me. I really appreciate it.”

He seems a little taken aback by my very human show of emotion, so I pull away, worried that I did something wrong. But when I look up at him, he’s got a goofy smile on his face that says he doesn’t mind at all. And that’s before he pats my head like I’m a prize winning Chihuahua or something.

Still, it feels pretty good to have one of Jaxon’s friends’ stamp of approval, so I just grin at him and do that ridiculous two-fingered wave salute back at him.

He laughs, then snarls a little at Lia—for show—before turning around and heading back the way we came.

I watch him for a second, expecting him to start booking it like Lia was, but instead he takes his time, moseying along like he’s in the middle of one of the old westerns my dad used to watch.

Which only makes me appreciate Mekhi more. He’s willing to give Lia and me some privacy, but he’s in no hurry to leave me alone with anyone. Even another vampire.

“So, what’s been going on with you?” I ask Lia, after another glance at my phone reveals no texts from Jaxon. And the fact that we have two minutes left to get to class.

“Pretty sure that’s my line after that whole scene in the lounge today.” She raises her brows in a wtf look.

“Oh, that. Umm, Jaxon ...” I trail off, not sure what I can possibly say about what happened.

Lia laughs. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. Hudson was overprotective in the same way, doing whatever he thought he had to to protect me. Even if there was nothing to protect me from.”

I think about correcting her, maybe even telling her what’s been going on so I can get her take on it, but we’re almost to the art studio and suddenly more people are around—vampires, witches *and* shifters. And since there’s more than enough gossip going around about me right now, I figure the last thing I need to do is add to it.

So instead of letting Lia know everything that’s happened over the last few days, I just kind of shrug and laugh. “You know how guys are.”

“Yeah, I do.” She rolls her eyes. “Which reminds me ... I was thinking you might want to get away from all that machismo for a while. Want to do a girl’s night tonight? We can do facials, watch some rom-com, eat too much chocolate. Maybe even do those mani pedis we were talking about the other day.”

“Oh.” I sneak another glance at my phone. Still no Jaxon. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Wow.” She gives me a mock-offended look. “Don’t sound so enthusiastic.”

“Sorry. I was just hoping Jaxon would ask me to spend some time with him tonight. But—” I hold up my phone with a sigh. “Nothing so far.”

“Yeah, well. Don’t hold your breath. Making plans isn’t exactly Jaxon’s *modus operandi*.” There’s a sadness running underneath the bitterness in her voice when she talks about him. It makes me think that—despite what she says—she misses his friendship as much as he misses hers.

Which sucks, especially considering how much the two of them are hurting right now. It’s not my place to get involved—I didn’t know Hudson and I wasn’t around when things went

bad between Jaxon and Lia—but I know how fleeting life can be, even for vampires. How quickly things can just end, with no warning and no chance to put things right.

I also know how much his problems with Lia weigh on Jaxon, reminding him daily of his role in what happened to Hudson. I can't help wondering if those problems weigh just as heavily on Lia ... and if maybe the two of them might finally begin to heal if they can forgive each other and themselves.

I mean, anything has to be better than this enmity between them. She's destroyed, he's devastated, and neither of them can move into the future because they're so traumatized by the past.

Which is why, in the end, I can't resist saying, "You know, he really misses you."

Her eyes jump to mine. "You don't know what you're talking about." It's half whisper, half hiss.

"I do know. He told me what happened. And I can't imagine how hurt you must be—"

"You're right. You can't imagine." She starts walking faster as we head up the incline to the art room. "So don't."

"Okay. Sorry." I'm practically running in an effort to keep up with her. "It's just, I think you would be better off if you could try to connect with Jaxon a little bit. Or anyone, really, Lia. I know you're sad, I know you just want to be left alone because everything else is too agonizing to even think about. Believe me, I know that." God, do I ever.

"But the thing is, you aren't getting any better like that. You're staying exactly where you were, drowning in grief, and until you decide to take the first step, you're always going to be drowning."

“What do you think I was doing when I invited you over for facials?” she asks, her voice smaller than I’ve ever heard it. “I’m tired of crying myself to sleep every night, Grace. I’m tired of hurting. That’s why I thought I could try to start over with you. You’re nice and you didn’t know Hudson or the person I used to be. I thought we had a chance of being friends. Real friends.”

She turns her face away from mine but I can still tell she’s biting her lip, obviously trying not to cry. I feel like a total jerk. “Of course we’re friends, Lia.” Impulsively, I wrap an arm around her shoulders and squeeze.

She stiffens up at first, but eventually she relaxes and leans into the hug. I used to be one of those people who never let go of the hug first—right up until my parents died. Then I got so many hugs I didn’t want from well-meaning people who didn’t know what else to do that backing away became self-preservation.

For Lia, I go back to the pre-accident time, hugging her until she decides it’s enough. It takes longer than I thought it would, which—in my mind—proves the theory that you hold on until the other person pulls away because you never know what they’re going through and if they need to be hugged.

My cell phone vibrates in the middle of the hug and it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to make a grab for it. But real friends are important—not to mention few and far between—so I wait it out, not letting go until Lia finally steps back.

My phone vibrates three more times, stops, then vibrates again. Lia rolls her eyes, but in a friendly way that says the storm has passed. “Why don’t you answer that and put Jaxon out of his misery? He’s probably terrified the shifters decided to have barbecued Grace for lunch despite his warning.”

She must be right, because two more texts come in before I can pull my phone out. Lia just laughs and shakes her head. “How the mighty have fallen.”

Not going to lie, my heart skips a beat—or five—at hearing her say that, even if there’s a part of me that’s afraid it’s wishful thinking. Still, it’s hard not to smile when I look at the string of texts he’s sent me.

Jaxon: Told you not to worry

Jaxon: I have lived to fight another day

Jaxon: Or should that be bite?

Jaxon: I have lived to bite another day ...

Jaxon: Anyway, come to my room tonight, whenever you’re available

Jaxon: I want to show you something

Jaxon: ??????

Geez. Impatient much? I should be annoyed by the question mark text, but instead it makes me a ridiculously happy. Not the demand implicit in it, but the fact that he’s that anxious to talk to me.

And because he contacted me as soon as he was done with Uncle Finn.

And (mostly) because he asked me out tonight. Or as close to out as we can get here in the middle of Alaska.

Me: Sorry, talking to Lia

Me: Definitely! What time?

Me: Glad things went okay

I hesitate for a second, then text what I've been thinking since he made the pun about living to bite another the day. It's the same thing I've been thinking since I left his room a couple hours ago.

Me: I like it when you bite

I blush a little as I send it, but I don't regret it. Because it's the truth and because I've already thrown myself at the boy. What else is there but to see it through to the end?

When my phone vibrates immediately, I'm almost afraid to look at it.

Afraid I've gone too far.

Afraid I'm pushing too fast.

Jaxon: Good, because I like the way you taste

It's corny and unoriginal and that doesn't matter at all, because--just like that-- I *swoon*, as Macy likes to say. For a boy who tries to be so implacable, Jaxon's got serious game. I mean, really. What girl is supposed to resist a text like that? Or the guy who texted it, when he's also the guy willing to fight wolves and dragons and anything else that comes along for her?

Not me, that's for sure.

Lia, on the other hand, makes a little gagging sound as she reads over my shoulder.

"Wow, Jaxon. Sappy much?"

"I like it." Still, I blank out my phone screen and shove it back into my pocket. No need for her to see anything else Jaxon might decide to write to me.

I tingle a little at the thought.

"So we raincheck tonight?" Lia says as she pushes open the door to the art studio. "And do facials tomorrow?"

It sounds like a plan to me. But after everything she just revealed, I can't help asking, "Are you sure? I can go see Jaxon after we have our girls' night."

"And make me the one responsible for standing in the way of true love?" she snarks. "I don't think so."

"Oh, it's not true love." Jaxon's words from earlier still sting a little, even though I understand why he feels the way he does. "I mean, Jaxon doesn't love me."

Lia snorts. "Wanna bet?"

"I'm serious. He doesn't." I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince at this point, Lia or myself.

"Then he's doing a really good impression of it," she tells me. "Because the Jaxon Vega I've known my whole life doesn't almost start a war over a girl he doesn't love."

Chapter Forty-Seven

Lia's words are still ringing in my ears ten hours later as I'm trying to figure out what to wear to Jaxon's room for our ... date. Logically, I know he won't care, but I care. I haven't exactly been at my best since I got to Katsmere Academy and just once I'd like to knock his socks off.

"You should go with the red dress," Macy says from where she's sitting cross legged on my bed, watching me agonize over my clothes choice. "Guys love red. And that dress is killer, if I do say so myself."

She's right. The dress is amazing, but ... "You don't think it's too obvious?"

"What's wrong with obvious?" she demands. "You're crazy about him. He obviously feels a whole lot of something for you or he wouldn't have nearly ripped Max's throat out in the lounge today. There's nothing wrong with letting him know you dressed up for him."

"I know that. It's just ..." I hold up the red dress for the ten millionth time. "This is a lot of dressing up."

"There's not enough material for it to be a lot of anything," Macy snickers.

"Yeah, that's kind of my point."

The red dress is amazing, no doubt about it. And I bet it looks gorgeous on Macy. But with all its geometric cuts and angles and the absolute lack of fabric near anything important, it's about as far from my usual style as I can get. Which is fine, I guess, except whatever happens with Jaxon tonight (or doesn't happen), I want it to happen when I look and feel like me.

“I think I’m going to go with the yellow one,” I say, reaching for the dress in question. It still has spaghetti straps, but the neckline is a little higher than the red one and it should actually hit below my knees when I put it on, versus the top half of my thighs, like the red one.

“Seriously? That’s my least favorite on of the bunch.” Macy makes grabby hands for it, but I move back so it’s out of her reach.

“Well, I like it. And the fact that it doesn’t scream that I want to get naked with him.”

“Says the girl who all but took her clothes off in his room today,” she says with a smirk.

“I never should have told you that! And I didn’t almost take my clothes off. I just acted like I was going to to get his attention.” I slip off my fuzzy pajamas and slip into the dress. “I was trying to make a point.”

“And what point was that exactly?” She gets off the bed and starts tugging on the dress to help it fall into place over my ridiculous curves. “Oh, right. The point that you lust after Jaxon’s sexy, sexy body.”

“I thought you didn’t like Jaxon.” I shoot her a smug look. “I mean, aren’t you the one who told me how dangerous he was and that I should stay far, far away from him?”

“And look how well you listened.” She crosses to her dresser and starts opening and closing the myriad assortment of little doors on the jewelry box she has perched on the top of it. “Besides, just because he scares me doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate his *incredibly manly form*,” she says in a deliberately deep and funny voice. “Plus those gorgeous eyes of his. *Swoon*.”

Swoon is right. Every time he looks at me I want to melt. “Everything about Jaxon is gorgeous,” I tell her as she crosses back over to me, a pair of dangling gold earrings in her hand.

“Try not to salivate on the dress,” she answers dryly. “Drool is so last decade.”

I stick my tongue out at her, but she just wiggles her brows. “Save that for Jaxon.”

“Oh my God! Are you trying to embarrass me to death before I ever make it to his room?”

“What’s there to be embarrassed about? You’re crazy about him, he’s crazy about you ... I say go for it.”

“Can you please just give me the earrings so I can get out of here?” I demand, holding my hand out for them.

“Hold still and I’ll put them in for you. The clasp is kind of tricky.” She leans over and slides one of the earrings into my earhole. “Wow, you smell good enough to eat ... Oops. I mean drink.”

“I swear to God, Macy ...”

“Okay, okay, I’ll stop messing with you.” She moves to put the second earring in. “It’s just so fun to watch you blush.”

“Yeah. So much fun,” I deadpan as she struggles to fasten the second earring.

Finally the clasp slides into place and she steps back. “How do you stay so still?” she asks, as she straightens out the skirt of my dress. “I swear you’re a statue. It barely felt like you were breathing while I was putting that earring in.”

“Terror that you were going to slip and rip the thing out of my ear. Or poke me in the eye,” I tease.

She rolls her eyes as I slip my feet into the one nice pair of heels I brought with me. They’re nude and strappy, so they go with almost anything. Including—thankfully—this yellow dress.

“So, how do I look?” I do a little twirl in the center of the room.

“Like you’re going to need a blood transfusion by the time Jaxon’s done with you.”

“Macy! Stop it!”

She just grins as I make my way to the door. “Seriously, you look amazing. You’re going to knock that vamp’s socks off.”

This time when I blush, it’s from excitement. “You really think so?”

“I know so.” She motions for me to twirl around again, so I do. “Also, I’ll bet you ten bucks that dress is going to be missing buttons when you finally make it back here.”

“Macy!” I give her a mock glare as I head for the door.

But she just grins and wiggles her eyebrows at me, all of which makes me laugh ridiculously hard. And calms me down, which I know is exactly what she was intending.

It’s so strange. Before this week, I hadn’t seen Macy in ten years. We were virtual strangers. And now I can’t imagine going back to life without her.

“Don’t wait up,” I say as I make my way out the door.

“Yeah, like that’s going to happen,” she tells me with a snort. “FYI, I’m going to need all the details. And I mean all. So you should probably pay really close attention to everything that happens so you get them right.”

“Absolutely,” I agree, tongue totally in cheek. “I’ll take notes. That way I can fill you in on every single thing that happens.”

“You think you’re being funny, but I’m serious. Notes would be extremely helpful.”

I roll my eyes. “Good-bye, Macy.”

“Come on, Grace! Let a girl live vicariously through you, will ya?”

“Why don’t you go find Cam? Do a little non-vicarious living of your own?”

She considers it. “Maybe I will.”

“Good. And you should totally wear the red dress when you do. After all, guys love it when you’re obvious”

She flips me off and throws a pillow at me that I only narrowly manage to dodge. “Temper, temper,” I tease, then hightail it out of the door before decides to throw something at me that will really hurt. Or, you know, cast some kind of spell that makes all my hair fall out. There are perils to living with a witch, after all.

My palms are sweating and my heart is beating a little too fast as I make my way up to the tower room. Maybe I should have come up right after classes, like I wanted to, because all the preparation—the hair, the make-up, the dress deliberation—all it’s done is give me more time to think.

And more time to get nervous.

Which is ridiculous. This is Jaxon. He’s seen me falling out of a tree and nearly bleeding to death. He’s saved my life several times since I got here. He’s seen me looking my worst—why am I suddenly so determined that he see me looking my best? It’s not like I actually think he’ll let himself fall in love with me if I straighten my hair and put on high heels.

I tell myself all of this on the way to his room—and I even believe it. But my hands are still trembling when I knock on his door. And so are my knees.

Jaxon opens the door with a sexy grin that turns to total blankness the second he sees me. Which is definitely *not* the reaction I was hoping for after spending the last two hours getting ready.

“Am I early?” I ask, discomfort suddenly racing through me. “If you want, I can come back later—“

I break off as he reaches for my wrist and gently tugs me into his room—and his arms.

“You look gorgeous,” he murmurs against my ear as he hugs me tight. “Absolutely beautiful.”

The ball of tension in my stomach dissolves as soon as he wraps himself around me.

As soon as I smell the sexy orange and bergamot scent of him.

As soon as I feel the strength and power of his body against and around my own.

“You look pretty amazing yourself,” I tell him. And he does, with his ripped jeans and bright blue cashmere sweater. “I think this is the first time I’ve seen you wearing something other than black.”

“Yeah, well, don’t let it get around.”

“Of course not.” I keep my arms wrapped around his waist as I grin up at him. “Wouldn’t want to mess up that badass reputation of yours.”

He rolls his eyes. “What is it about my reputation you’re so obsessed with?”

“The fact that everybody feels like they need to warn me against being with you.

Obviously. I’ve never dated the school bad boy before.”

I’m teasing, but the second the words leave my mouth I want to take them back. After all, it was only this morning he was telling me how worried he is about hurting me. Just because that fear seems ridiculous to me considering he’s never been anything but gentle with me, doesn’t mean he doesn’t take it very, very seriously.

Sure enough, Jaxon pulls away. I try to grab on, but there’s no holding him if he wants to go.

“I hurt you once, Grace,” he says after a second, eyes and voice deadly serious. “It’s not going to happen again.”

“First of all, let’s be clear. *You* didn’t hurt me. A piece of flying glass hurt me. And secondly, I know I’m safe with you. I wouldn’t be here if I thought otherwise.”

He studies me for a second, like he’s trying to decide if I’m telling the truth. He must decide I am, because eventually he nods his head, reaches for me again. And this time when he pulls me against him, he lowers his head and presses his lips to mine.

It’s different than the kiss we shared earlier, softer, more gentle. But it reaches inside me all the same. Lights me up. Turns me inside out with everything I feel for him and everything I wish he’d let himself feel for me.

But tonight isn’t about wishing for what I can’t have, so I lock that thought down deep inside of me and hold onto Jaxon with everything I have. And everything I am.

The kiss lasts forever—the soft whisper of his mouth against mine—and still he pulls away too soon. Still I’m clutching at him, fingers tangled in his shirt, my body straining against his as I try desperately to hold him to me for just a little longer.

But when I finally let him go, when I finally open my eyes, the Jaxon staring down at me isn’t the one I’m used to seeing. There’s no regret in his dark eyes, no scowl on his face. Instead, he looks lighter—happier—than I’ve ever seen him.

It’s a good look on him, one that has me breathless for a whole host of different reasons. I wonder if he feels the same way about me, because for several long seconds, we don’t move at all. We just stare at each other, eyes locked, breaths held, fingers entwined.

There’s a bubble of emotion inside of me and it grows with every second I get to look at Jaxon. Every second I get to touch him. It’s been so long since I’ve felt it that it takes me a few minutes to recognize it as happiness.

I know it won't last forever, know that the pain of my parents' death will catch up with me again soon enough. But for now, I'm going to hold onto every moment of this feeling. Every drop of the love I feel for this boy who has suffered so terribly.

Eventually, he turns away and the loss I feel is a physical ache inside of me. "What are you doing?" I ask, watching as he rummages in his closet.

"Much as I love that dress, you need a hoodie," he answers, pulling out a heavy, fur-lined one from The North Face ... in black, of course.

He slides my arms into the sleeves, zips it up. Pulls the hood over my head. Then he grabs the red blanket off the end of his bed and says, "Come on."

He reaches a hand out to me and I take it—of course I do. Right now, there isn't anywhere I wouldn't follow this boy.

And that's before he pulls back the curtains that cover his window and I get my first look at what's waiting for us.

Chapter Forty-Eight

“Oh my God!” I gasp, all but running to the window. “OhmyGod!!! How did you know?”

“You’ve only mentioned them like three different times,” he answers, sliding the window open and climbing onto the parapets before holding his hand out to me.

I follow him outside, my eyes glued to the sky spread out in front of us. It’s lit up like one giant rainbow, the background an incredible, intense purple while swirls of periwinkle and green and red dance across it.

“The Northern Lights,” I breathe, so caught up in the insane beauty of them that I barely feel the cold ... or Jaxon wrapping his super warm blanket around me.

“So, do they live up to your expectations?” he asks, wrapping his arms around me from behind, so that I’m snuggled up in the blanket *and* his arms.

“They’re even better,” I tell him, a little astonished at how intense the colors are and how fast the lights are moving. “I’ve only seen pictures before this. I didn’t they’d really move like this.”

“This is nothing,” he answers, pulling me closer. “It’s early yet. Wait until they really get going.”

“You mean there’s more?”

He laughs. “So much more. The higher velocity of the solar winds hitting the atmosphere, the faster they dance.”

“And the colors are all about the elements, right? The green and red are oxygen and the blue and purple are nitrogen.”

“You know a lot about the lights.”

“I’ve loved them since I was a kid. My dad painted a mural on my bedroom wall when I was seven. Told me he’d bring me here to see them one day.” I can’t help thinking about how he didn’t get to keep that promise. And about all the other promises he didn’t get to keep as well.

Jaxon nods and hugs me tighter. Then he turns me around so that I’m facing him. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course I do.” The answer is instinctive and it comes from the deepest, most primitive part of me.

He knows it too. I can see it in the way his eyes widen, feel it in the way his heart is suddenly thudding heavily against my own. “You didn’t even have to think about it,” he whispers, fingers stroking reverently down my face.

“What’s there to think about?” I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him down for a kiss. “I love you. Of course I trust you.”

He closes his eyes then, rests his forehead against mine for several long seconds before taking my mouth with his.

He kisses me like he’s starving for me. Like his world depends on it. Like I’m the only thing that matters to him.

I kiss him right back the same way, until I can barely breathe and the colors behind my eyes are brighter than the aurora borealis. Until it feels like I’m flying.

“Maybe I should have asked if you’re afraid of heights,” Jaxon murmurs after a few minutes, his lips still pressed against mine.

“Heights? Not really,” I answer, sliding my hands through his hair and trying to get him to kiss me again.

“Good.” He moves my right hand until it’s at my throat, so that I’m able to keep the blanket around me by clutching both corners in one fist. “Hold onto that blanket.”

And then he grabs my left hand and spins me out fast and sharp, like they used to do in those old-time swing dances.

I gasp at the fast, jerky movement—and the fact that through it all I can’t feel the ground beneath my feet. Then scream a few seconds later as I get my first good look at the sky since Jaxon started to kiss me.

We’re no longer on the parapet looking up at the northern lights. Instead, we’re floating at least a hundred feet above the top of the castle, and somehow it feels like we’re right in the middle of the aurora borealis.

“What are you doing?” I demand when I can finally get the words out past the terrified lump in my throat. “How are we flying?”

“I think floating is a better description of what we’re doing,” Jaxon tells me with a grin.

“Flying, floating. Does it matter?” I clutch his hand with all my might. “Don’t drop me.”

He laughs. “I’m telekinetic, remember? You’re not going anywhere.”

“Oh, right.” The truth of that gets through to me, has me relaxing—just a tiny bit—the death grip I’ve got on him. And for the first time since we started floating, I really look at the sky around us.

“Oh my God,” I whisper. “This is the most insane thing I’ve ever seen.”

Jaxon just laughs and pulls me back in, this time with my back against his chest so I can see everything. And then he spins us around and around through the lights.

It's the ride of a lifetime, better than anything Disneyland or Six Flags has to offer. I laugh all the way through it, loving every second of it.

Loving the thrill of whirling across the sky with the lights.

Loving even more that I get to do it wrapped in Jaxon's arms.

We stay up for hours, dancing and floating and twirling our way through the most spectacular light show on earth. On one level I know I'm cold-- even wrapped up in the jacket, with Jaxon curled around me and the aurora borealis spread out across the sky in front and behind me—but on all the important levels, I barely feel it. How can I when the joy of being here, in this moment, with Jaxon makes it impossible to focus on anything else?

Eventually, though, he brings us back down to the parapet. I want to argue, want to beg him to keep us up just a little bit longer. But I don't know how his telekinesis works, don't know how much energy and power it took for him to keep us up there as long as he did.

"And you thought vampires were only good for biting things," he murmurs into my ear when we're once again standing on solid ground.

"I never said that." I turn into him and press my mouth against his throat, loving the way his breath catches in his throat the moment I put my lips on him. "In fact, I think you're good for a lot of things."

"Do you now?" He pulls me closer, drops kisses on my eyes, my cheeks, my lips.

"I do." I slide my hands into the back pocket of his jeans, and revel in the way he shudders at my touch. If he won't love me, at least he wants me as much as I want him.

That's something.

I lift my mouth for a kiss, but he steps away before I can press my lips against his. I start to follow him, but he just smiles and rubs his thumb across my bottom lip. “If I start to kiss you now, I’m not going to want to stop.”

“I’m okay with that,” I answer as I try to plaster our bodies together.

“I know you are.” He grins. “But I have something I want to do first.”

“What could possibly be more interesting than kissing me?” I joke.

“Absolutely nothing.” He drops a quick kiss on my lips and then takes a big step back.

“But I’m hoping this comes in a close second. Close your eyes.”

“Why?”

He gives a heavy mock sigh. “Because I asked you to. Obviously.”

“Fine. But you better still be here when I open them up.”

“You’re in my room. Where else would I be?”

“I don’t know, but I’m not taking any chances.” I narrow my eyes at him. “You have a bad habit of disappearing whenever things get ... interesting.”

He grins. “That’s because I’m usually afraid if I stay any longer I’ll bite you. Now that I know you don’t mind it, I won’t have to run quite so fast.”

“Or you could just not run at all.” I tilt my head to the side in an obvious invitation.

His eyes go from their normal warm chocolate brown to the black of blown out pupils and I shiver in anticipation. At least until he says, “You’re not going to sidetrack me, Grace. So just do us both a favor and close your eyes.”

“Fine.” I pout a little, but I do as he says. After all, the sooner we get past this, the sooner I’ll be able to kiss him again. “Do your worst.”

His laugh is a warm breath of air against my ear. “Don’t you mean my best?”

“With you, I never know.” I wait impatiently for him to do whatever it is he’s going to do—at least until I feel his chest pressed around my back and his arms on either side of me.

“What—“

“You can open your eyes now,” he says.

I do and then nearly fall over in shock. “What ...”

“Do you like it?” he asks, his voice soft and uncertain in a way I’ve never heard from him before.

“It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” I lift a trembling hand to the necklace he’s holding just a few inches in front of me, brush my finger across the *huge* rainbow colored gemstone hanging in the center of the gold chain. “What is it?”

“It’s a mystic topaz. Some jewelers call it the aurora borealis stone because of the way the colors flow together.”

“I can see why.” The cut of the stone is incredible, each facet carved to highlight the blues and greens and purples within it so that they bleed into each other even as they stand out.

“It’s gorgeous.”

“I’m glad you like it.” He lowers the necklace until the stone rests a little below my collarbone and fastens it around my neck. Then he steps back to look at it. “It looks good on you.”

“I can’t take this, Jaxon.” I force the words out even though everything inside of me is screaming for me to hold tight to the necklace and never let it go. “It’s ...” Huge. And I can only imagine how much it cost. More than everything I own put together, I’m pretty sure.

“Perfect for you,” he says, nuzzling the pendant aside and pressing a kiss to my skin underneath it.

“To be fair, I’m pretty sure it’s perfect for any woman.” Of its own volition, my hand creeps up to hold onto the stone. I don’t want to give it back. “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Well then, you’re well-matched.”

I groan. “You’re ridiculously sappy.”

“Yeah,” he agrees with a little you’ve-got-me shrug. “And you’re ridiculously beautiful.”

I laugh, but before I can say anything else, he’s kissing me, really kissing me, and anything I was going to say flies right out of my head.

I open to him, loving the way his lips move over mine. Loving even more the way his tongue brushes against the corners of my mouth before he gently scrapes a fang across my lower lip.

I shiver as he moves downward, brushing his lips across my jaw and down my neck. I’ve never felt anything like this before, never imagined that I could ever feel something like this. It’s so much, physically and emotionally, that it’s almost overwhelming—but in the best way possible.

“You’re cold,” he says, misinterpreting the shiver. “Let’s go inside.”

I don’t want to go inside, don’t want this magical, mystical night to end just yet. But as Jaxon pulls away the cold catches up with me and I shiver again. That’s all it takes to have him lifting me up and all but shoving me through the window.

He follows me in, then slams the window shut behind us. I reach for him, feeling a little bereft now that we’re back down here in the real world instead of dancing across the sky. But I’m finding that Jaxon on a mission is not to be deterred, especially when that mission involves

something he considers important to my safety or comfort. So I wrap my fingers around the pendant I never want to take off and wait for him to do his thing.

Within minutes, he's got a new blanket around me and a cup of tea in both of our hands. I take a sip to placate him, then take another one because the tea is really, really good.

"What is this?" I ask, bringing the cup to my nose so I can sniff it a little. There's orange in it, along with cinnamon and sage and a couple other scents I can't quite identify.

"It's my favorite blend of Lia's. She brought it to me this afternoon, kind of a peace offering, if you will."

"Lia?" I can't keep the surprise out of my voice considering the conversation she and I had this morning.

"Yeah, believe me I know. When I opened the door, she was the last person I ever thought I'd find on the other side of it." He shrugs. "But she said you had talked to her this morning and she hadn't been able to stop thinking about me since. She didn't stay long, just brought the tea and told me she was willing to try to get back to how things were if I was."

"And are you?" I ask, joy a wild thing within me at the idea of Jaxon finding a little piece of what he lost.

"I want to try," he tells me. "I don't know what that looks like or what it means, but I'm going to give it a shot. Thanks to you."

"I didn't do anything," I tell him. "It's all you two."

"I don't think so."

"I do. In fact—" I break off as he drains his tea and then sets the cup aside. His eyes are glowing in that way they do when he wants something, and my stomach does a slow roll at the realization that *I'm* what he wants.

I set my half-drunk tea aside and reach for Jaxon, everything in me straining to be close to everything in him.

He pulls me against him with a growl, burying his face in the curve between my neck and my shoulder and pressing long, slow, lingering kisses on the sensitive skin there. I shudder a little, press closer, loving the way his mouth skims over my shoulder and down my arm to the bend of my elbow. Loving just as much the way his hand slides up and down my back over the thin fabric of my dress.

Usually, when I'm with him, I'm covered in layers of clothing—sweaters, hoodies, thick, fleece pants. But right now I can feel the warmth of his palm through the thin fabric of this dress. Can feel the softness of his skin as his fingertips skim over my shoulder blades.

He feels really, really good. So good, in fact, that I just lean into him and let him touch me wherever—and however—he wants.

I don't know how long we stand like that, him touching and kissing and caressing me.

Long enough for my insides to turn to melted candle wax.

Long enough for every cell in my body to catch fire.

More than long enough for me to fall even deeper in love with Jaxon Vega.

He smells so good, tastes so good, *feels* so good that all I can think about is him. All I can want is him.

And when he scrapes his fangs across the delicate skin of my throat, everything inside of me stills in anticipation.

"Can I?" he murmurs, his breath warm against my skin.

"Please," I answer, arching my neck to give him better access.

He draws a lazy circle right above my heart with his fangs. “You sure?” he asks again, and his reticence—his care—only makes me want him more.

Only makes me want *this* more.

“Yes,” I manage to gasp out, my hands sliding around his waist to hold him close. “Yes, yes, yes.”

It must be the reassurance he needs, because seconds later, he strikes, his fangs sinking deep inside me.

The same pleasure as earlier sweeps through me. Warm, slow, sweet. I give myself up to it, up to him, because I know that I can. Because I know that Jaxon will never take too much blood from me.

He’ll never do anything that might hurt me.

I slide my hands up his back to tangle in the cool silk of his hair even as I tilt my head all the way back to give him better access. He snarls a little at the invitation, but then I feel his fangs sinking deeper, feel the pressure of his sucking getting stronger, harder.

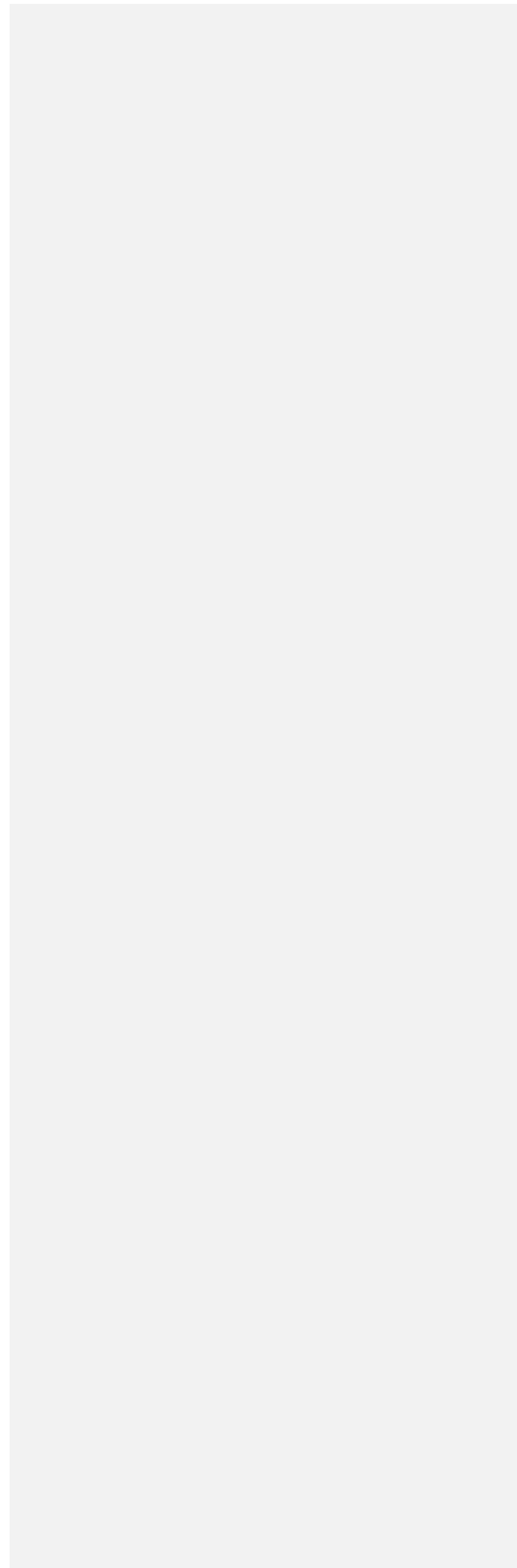
The longer he sucks, the deeper I fall into the pleasure and the more I want to give him

But slowly the warmth I feel in his arms is replaced by a chill that comes from my bones and seems to swallow me whole. A creeping lethargy comes with it, making it hard for me to think and even harder for me to move, to breathe.

For a moment, just a moment, some modicum of self-preservation rears its head. Has me calling Jaxon’s name. Has me arching back and struggling weakly against his hold.

That’s when he snarls, his grip on me getting harder, tighter, as he pulls me more firmly against him. His fangs sink deeper and the moment of clarity fades as he begins to suck in earnest.

I lose all sense of time, all sense of self as I shudder and wrap myself around him. As I give myself up to Jaxon and whatever he wants from me.



Chapter Forty-Nine

Everything kind of fades after that, so that I have no idea how much time passes before Jaxon shoves me away from him. I hit the bed, hard, and tumble onto it, where I lay, dazed, for several seconds.

Until Jaxon snarls, “Get up, Grace. Get out now!”

There’s a wildness to his voice that cuts through the lethargy, at least a little. An urgency that has me opening up my eyes and trying desperately to focus on him.

He’s towering above me now, fangs dripping blood and face contorted with rage. His hands are curled into fists and a deep, dark growl is coming from low in his throat.

This isn’t my Jaxon, the voice inside of me all but screams. This caricature from every B vampire movie in existence isn’t the boy I love. He’s a monster, one teetering on the brink of losing all control.

“Get out,” he snarls at me again, his dark eyes finally finding mine. But they aren’t his eyes, not really, and I shrink back at the soulless, bottomless depths staring out at me even as the voice deep inside of me echoes his words. *Get out, get out, get out!*

Something’s wrong with him—really wrong—and while there’s a part of me that’s terrified *for* him, right now there a much bigger part that’s terrified *of* him. And that part is definitely in control as I scramble off the bed, careful not to make any movements he can interpret as the least bit aggressive.

Jaxon tracks me with his eyes and the snarling gets worse as I start inching toward the door. But he doesn't move, doesn't make any attempt to stop me—just watches me with narrowed eyes and gleaming fangs.

Run, run, run! The voice inside of me is full on screaming now, and I'm more than ready to listen to it.

Especially when Jaxon yells, "Hurry up! Get out of here, Grace!"

The fear and urgency in his voice cut right through me and have me running for the door, to hell with worrying if that will trigger the killer in him or not. He's already triggered and if I don't heed his warning, I'll have no one to blame but myself. Especially when it's obvious he's doing everything in his power to give me the chance to escape.

With that in mind, I stumble to the door as fast as my shaky legs can carry me. It's heavy, so I grab on with both hands and pull as hard as I can. But I'm weak from blood loss and it barely budes the first time. I can feel Jaxon getting closer, can feel him looming over me as I try desperately to find the strength to make the door move.

"Please," I beg. "Please, please, please." At this point I don't know if I'm talking to Jaxon or the door.

He must not know, either, because suddenly his hand is there on the door handle, throwing it wide open. "Go," he hisses out of the corner of his mouth.

I don't have to be told twice. I scramble over the threshold and through the reading alcove, desperate to make it to the stairs ... and as far from this evil incarnation of the boy I love as I can possibly get.

It's a small alcove, only a matter of feet between me and freedom. But I'm so light-headed right now that I can barely stand upright and I weave with every step I take.

Still, I'm determined to get to the steps. Determined to save Jaxon the pain of having killed another person that he cares about. Whatever is happening right now isn't his fault—even as messed up as I am right now I can see that something is very, very wrong.

But there will be no convincing him of that if something happens to me, no way of getting him to believe that this—whatever this is—isn't completely his fault. And so I dig deep, push myself harder than I ever have before in an effort to save myself ... and in turn, save Jaxon.

I use every ounce of energy I have to make it to the top of the stairs, but I do make it. Crawl down them if you have to, the voice inside of me yells. Do whatever you need to do.

I grab onto the wall, push myself around the edge of the stairs and prepare to take my first shaky step down. Except I slam right into Lia before I can ever take that step.

"Not feeling so good, Grace?" she asks, and there's an edge in her voice that I've never heard before. "What's the matter?"

"Lia, oh thank God! Help him, please. Something's wrong with Jaxon. I don't know what it is, but he's losing control. He's—"

She slaps me across the face so hard that she knocks me into the nearest wall. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to do that," she tells me. "Now sit down and shut up or I'll let Jaxon have you."

I stare at her in shock, my sluggish brain having trouble assimilating this new turn of events. Only when Jaxon races, snarling, out of his room, does any sense of clarity kick in—brought on by the terror sweeping through me.

I'm pretty sure Lia's no match for Jaxon on a normal day—no one is—but now that something's wrong with him, I'm not so sure.

"Jaxon, stop!" I yell, but he's too busy putting himself between me and Lia to listen.

“Get away from her!” he orders, as things start flying off the shelves all around us.

Lia just sighs. “I knew I should have made the tea stronger. But I was afraid it would kill your little pet and I couldn’t let that happen. At least not yet.”

She shrugs, then says in a kind of sing song voice, “No worries,” right before she pulls a gun out of her pocket and shoots Jaxon straight in the heart.

Chapter Fifty

I scream, try to get to him, but all I manage to do is fall to my knees. I’m weak and dizzy and nauseous—so nauseous. The room is spinning and waves of cold are sweeping through my body, tightening up my muscles and making it impossibly hard to breathe, to move.

And still I try to reach Jaxon. I’m sobbing and screaming as I crawl across the floor, terrified that she’s killed him. I know it’s not easy to kill a vampire, but I’m pretty sure that if anyone could do it, it would be another vampire.

“God, would you shut up already!” Lia tells me, kicking me so hard in the stomach that she knocks the breath out of me.. “I didn’t kill him. I just tranq’d him. He’ll be fine in a few hours. You, on the other hand, probably won’t be so lucky.”

Maybe she expects me to get hysterical all over again at that revelation, but it isn’t exactly a shock. As drugged and empty of blood as I am right now, my mind is still working well

enough to figure out that I won't be getting out of this alive. Which is saying something considering I can barely remember my own name at the moment,

"You should have drunk more tea," she tells me, disgust evident in her voice "Everything would be easier if you just did what you were supposed to do, Grace."

She's looking at me like she expects me to say I'm sorry, which definitely isn't happening. Besides what would that even look like? Oops? So sorry I'm making it harder for you to kill me?

Give me a break.

Lia keeps talking but it's getting harder and harder for me to follow what she's saying. Not when the room is spinning and my head is muddled and all I can think about is Jaxon.

Jaxon, twirling me through the aurora borealis.

Jaxon, staring at me with hellish eyes.

Jaxon, telling me to run, trying to protect me even when he's drugged out of his mind.

It's enough to have me rolling over, enough to have me trying to crawl to him even though I don't even have the strength to push to my knees.

"Jaxon," I call his name, but it comes out so slurred I can barely understand it. Still, I try again. And again. Because I'm still coherent enough to know that if Jaxon knows I'm in trouble he'll move heaven and earth to get to me. Even if it involves waking up from a stealth tranq gun attack.